

**THE  
MEDIIEVAL  
SAINTS  
OF INDIA**

**JASHBHAI PATEL**

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This book is dedicated  
To  
All the Saints of India  
Whose names I have mentioned  
Or  
Not mentioned in this book.

सन्त परम हितकारी, जगत माँही ॥ ध्रु ॥  
प्रभुपाद प्रगट करावत प्रीति, भरम मिटावत भारी ॥ १ ॥  
परम कृपालु सकल जीवन पर, हरि सम सब दुखहारी ॥ २ ॥  
त्रिगुणातीत फिरत तन त्यागी, रीत जगत से न्यारी ॥ ३ ॥  
ब्रहानंद संतन की सोबत, मिलत है प्रकट मुरारी ॥ ४ ॥

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## PREFACE

This book, *The Medieval Saints of India*, narrates the life and works of Indian saints. This is not an encyclopedia of Indian saints. The saints whom I have chosen here have played very important role in educating the Indian masses in Indian Dharma and its culture. I came to formulate this book in my mind when I was writing my book, *The Medieval Philosophers of India*. I came to realize then that the works of these Acharyas reached among the Indian masses through the life and works of the saints I have chosen here. This is then the genesis of the present book. Now I give the outline of this book.

The book begins with the title, Introduction. It tells how the Bhakti Movement began in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu. The next title is Dharma. In it, I have briefly stated the ideas of Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo on Indian Dharma. After having introduced the Indian Dharma, I have taken the life and works of Indian saints. Chapter 1 begins with a map of Assam and it contains the narration of life and works of Assamese saints who gave them their Dharma and culture. Chapter 2 begins with a map of West Bengal and it contains the narration of the Bengali saints. In this manner, we reach right up to the Indian State of Kerala.

The saints' biographies, which are available to us, are full of legends. I have separated out the legends in my text because some might believe or not believe in them. For instance, Vinoba Bhave does not believe that Jhandev and his brothers and sister flew to Chang Dev on a rock on which they were sitting. He believed in some other legends. I have kept some legends for completeness of my work.

The readers might wonder what relevance these saints have today in modern India. These biographies suggest that if India wants to keep her Dharma alive, then she would need to produce saints throughout her existence because the Indian Dharma is not an organised religion. It is a living thing, which is exemplified by her saints and these saints would need to know not only the Indian Dharma but also the modern existing knowledge in all the important branches of learning. Only then, they would have impact on the world.

The readers might find that some of the biographies are very short and the others are very long. In this matter I had no choice. Biographies of many saints are not available to me at all. One case that I would like to point out is that of Saint Anandghan of Madhya Pradesh. He was a Jain saint who lived in the forest of Mount Abu in Rajasthan. He wrote extensively. His devotional songs are sung even to this date among the Vaishnavas of Pusti Marg. His poems on Jain thirthankars are recited by Jains. Yet, I could not find enough information about him. For this reason the map of Madhya Pradesh does not find a place in this book. From the preceding narration we should admit that we know very little about some saints. Naturally then, some biographies are bound to be short.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was typeset on eight computers in Microsoft Word. The computers belonged to my friends: Sharad Shah, Janak Chauhan, Renu, Chinu, Trupti, and Rohit and to friends in Shishu Milap. Krishnakant helped me in formatting the text, in adjusting the maps in the text and in many other ways. Thanks are due to all these friends. I thank them sincerely here for the help they have given to me.

My friend Chinu carefully read the text and I very much appreciate his help and the word thanks is not enough for the troublesome task he undertook. The cost for the publication of this book will be borne by my elder sister, Savita.

## INTRODUCTION

The present book *The Medieval Saints of India* is a sequel to my earlier book *The Medieval Philosophers of India*. This sequel complements the previous work. Normally, philosophy is considered an academic subject. But in India, philosophy percolated through the writings of many Indian saints to the masses. It is my endeavor to present here the life and works of these saints and to show how they educated the poor toiling masses.

The writings of these saints are not in one single language. They lived in various parts of India and wrote works in their respective regional language. Hence, it is extremely difficult for a person like me to convey the beauty of these works because I am not a linguist.

In 1950, the Constitution of India has given official status to some 15 languages including English. Among these, 12 are regional languages of India. These are: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Tamil, and Telugu. The works of Indian saints are in these languages. Of these 12 languages, I can read and understand four, namely, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Gujarati. This means that I have relied on others for information of many of these works. I have acknowledged this fact at appropriate places in my write up. Here, I single out Vinoba Bhave and express my gratitude to him. I referred to *Vinoba Sahitya*, Vols. 9, 10, and 11 and these helped me much. These are in Hindi.

I read the works of many authors to collect material for my book. Among them too, I found Vinoba Bhave to be unique. Here was a man, who liked medieval saints walked all over India and participated in the prayer meetings of the local people and gathered first hand the knowledge of their scriptural books. In this respect, he equaled those saints who traveled all over India as pilgrims for 10 to 20 years. Vinoba Bhave too walked for 13 years with his followers during the Bhoodan movement.

I am not blind not to see the difference between a pilgrimage and the walk of Vinoba for the social uplift of the people. Even then, it is true that his heart was in learning regional scriptures with help of local scholars and discusses the spiritual content of each text. In this he was very close to medieval saints.

The question then arises: Was Vinoba a saint? This question is difficult for me to answer. I have not seen him even from a distance. His followers have not written a significant biography of the master. Anyway, to write any biography is very difficult. When a biography fails to bring out the true personality of the person then it degenerates into a hagiography. What we have then is his bio data from his followers. They fail to take into account the criticism of his critics. Vinoba's critics are very eminent men. Acharya Kirpalani, a Gandhian and one of the Presidents of the Indian National Congress called him a "Sarkari Sadhu" (Government-sponsored saint). Another Gandhian, Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) showed 'great disgust' when Vinoba Bhave made a 'mere comment' like 'I leave it to God for verdict'. Since then many other have criticized him calling him a pious puritan, a self-righteous man devoid of humor and so on. These are indeed dark words that portray Vinoba as a conceited man and not worthy to be a saint.

His critics tell us that Vinoba Bhave was fond of impressing ordinary persons with his vast learning. How far this criticism is true I cannot say but it is a fact that he withdrew himself completely from socio-political work.

From the foregoing we see that Vinoba Bhave became a controversial figure after 1975. This indeed is sad. For a person who chose in his early boyhood Shankaracharya and Jnandev as his gurus, this was a severe blow. His misfortune began when he added Gandhi as his third guru in his twenties. Perhaps, he was not a good judge of men. The Bhoodan movement was infiltrated with cunning politicians who finally usurped his leadership. Sainthood and politics cannot go hand in hand. And, for his opponents, he was neither here nor there. With Vinoba's departure India lost the last remnants of saintly heritage in public life. No one among the known persons has taken his place so far. Both Nehru and Bhave were betrayed by their own friends and met tragic end. (No one would call Nehru a saintly man. I do.) These tragedies hurt India much. Both of them were not made for politics but were dragged into freedom movement due to unavoidable circumstances. Both wanted to make

India great and knew that outdated ideas would not work. And they followed their own path, which was not to the liking of Gandhians and many other Indians.

If I have written here on Vinoba Bhave at such length, it is because I have quoted him often in my present work. Whatever may be his standing among his socio-political fraternity, I found him a rare scholar. He was a linguist and had read the vast literature written by many saints in languages not his own. His command of Sanskrit was superb. He had studied ancient Indian scriptures with rare ease. His knowledge of his mother tongue Marathi was no less. It is said that his conversation in Marathi with his friends was a treat to listen. A man of such profound learning cannot be conceited. He is likely to be a saintly man if not a saint.

Swami Anand, a Gandhian who was living in Kumaon Himalayas also took note of Vinoba's scholarship. He bracketed him with Swami Tapovanji, who was held in high esteem for his mastery of Sanskrit scriptures by many sadhus and sanyasis living in Himalayas. Swami Anand certainly knew these men closely.

In the preceding pages, I have clearly shown from where I have collected my material for this book. Now I come to the subject proper.

### **SANT SAHITYA AND BHAKTI MOVEMENT**

Above, I have used phrases like "Sant Sahitya" and "Bhakti Movement". In these, three words do not belong to the English language. When I translate "Sant Sahitya" as saint's literature, it does not convey what Indians feel or mean. In the same way when I translate "Bhakti Movement" as devotional movement it does not mean much. Of course, my translation is correct and readers should remember what the Indian phrases mean. With this explanation now I take up the history of Sant Sahitya and also of Bhakti Movement.

The Bhakti Movement began in South India. No one can pin point the exact date when it began. However, we can fairly assume that it began around 100 A.D. The great saint Thiruvalluvar (100-200 A.D.) lived around this period. We know very little about him but he has left behind a great work called Thirukkural. This is considered the Tamil Veda. Vinoba Bhave, who had traveled extensively in Tamil Nadu, has said that he found Thirukkural in every Tamilian's hand. Figuratively, this means that Thirukkural is found in every Tamilian's home and Thiruvalluvar had and has captured the heart of the people of the Tamil land. A saint is one who captures the heart of his people and makes them noble human beings. Thirukkural teaches Bhakti—devotion to God, ethic of love and tells the king his duty. I quote here some lines from it:

Men without love think only of self,  
but the loving strip themselves to the bone for others.

For a kindness done without expecting reward,  
heaven and earth are hardly sufficient recompense.

The joy of the avenger lasts but a day,  
the joy of the peace maker lasts forever.

They are great who fast and do penance,  
but they who forgive wrongs are even greater.

This, they say, is the highest wisdom -  
to return no harm to them that harm you.

(English version from a book by Basham)

The above quotes illustrate Sant Sahitya and it is the earliest one. Thirukkural's impact in Tamil land was so great that many saints were born in Tamil Nadu. We will review here their works very briefly.

Many of the saints of Tamil Nadu are called nayanmars and alvars. The nayanmars are devotees of Shiva and alvars are devotees of Vishnu. There are in all 63 nayanmars and 12 alvars and they are held in high esteem in Tamilnadu. The four nayanmars who are very

famous are known as Naalvars, the four-some or the quartet. The alvars twelve in number too are well-known. We will look into the life of four Naalvars and three of the more well-known Alvars.

## NAALVARS

The four Naalvars are: (1) Appar (610-691 AD) whose parental name was Marulneekkiyaar and scholars remember him by the name Thirunaavukkuarasar; (2) Thirugnaanasambandhar (642-658 AD) whom we will refer to by the short form Sambandhar; (3) Sundaramoorthi Swamikkal (whose birth date is not known but is placed between 700 and 800 AD) who is known as Sundarar; and (4) Maanikkavaachakar (between 700 and 800 AD). The last named Naalvar's birth date is highly controversial. G.Vanmikanathan places him in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD whereas Mu. Varadarajan puts him in 8<sup>th</sup> Century. Some scholars like to put him in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact all the dates which I have placed in the brackets for all the Naalvars are tentative because authors whom I have referred to do not agree among themselves.

- (1) **APPAR:** This Naalvar got his name Appar from Sambandhar, who as a child of 6 or 8, on seeing an elderly person, lovingly addressed him as 'Appare', 'O, father!' and the name Appar stuck to him since then.

Appar was born in a village called Thiruvaamor in the present day South Arcot District of Tamil Nadu, which was then known as Manaippaadi. He and his elder sister Thilakavathiyar grew up in the home of their parents, Pugazhanaar and Maathiniyaar, who died one after the other when their daughter was about 14 years old. The desolate orphans were financially well off as they came from a peasantry class called Velaalar. They owned a fairly good estate. But a further misfortune followed. The sister was betrothed to an army officer who died on the battlefield. The marriage could not take place and she devoted her life to bring up her younger brother to manhood.

Appar in due course of time took charge of his estate and became a rich man with a very generous heart. He planted forests, dug tanks and helped those who sought his help. His biographer, Sekkizhaar, wrote: "... he performed several charities ... and, moved by compassion, set up free feeding houses and water booths." Yet, he realized the impermanence of worldly life and decided not to be 'a victim to this ephemeral life' and chose to be a monk.

"Forthwith, Appar went to Paatalipuram, a strong-hold of the Jain Monks, which was probably, on the sea-shore, quite close to the present Thiruppaathirippuliyoor, which is situated on the Main Railway Line from Madras to Thanjavoor, three kilometers to the north of Cudaloor Junction. He joined a Jain Monastery."

"On Appar leaving her, Thilakavathiyar left her village and took shelter in the temple of Lord Civan [Shiva] at Thiruvathikai-Veerattaanam, and engaged herself in the service of the Lord day and night."

At what age Appar became a Jain, we do not know. But it is assumed that it could not be less than 25. He might have lived in the Jain Monastery for about 10 years and rose to a high position and was named Dharmasena. Anyway, these rosy days did not last long. He fell seriously ill and developed colic pain, which could not be cured by any doctor. Now he remembered his sister and longed to see her. He sent a messenger secretly but his sister remained firm and asked him to return to her. This "he did one day, in the dead of night, clad head to foot in a white garment. He stumbled in the dark night, with no one to guide him, through fields and furrows, and ditches and dunes, and, at last, before day break arrived at the doors of his sister and fell at her feet, and wept out his tale of woe."

"Thilakavathiyar lovingly lifted her brother who had prostrated at her feet, applied with her own hands the sacred ash on his forehead, and led him to the presence of Lord Civan in the temple at Thiruvathikai-Veerattaanam." (G. Vanmikanathan)

Appar returned to his ancestral Shivite (or Shaivite) fold and sang his first song around 650 AD before the idol of Shiva in her sister's temple. This was a new beginning. But Jains did not take kindly to this conversion of their Dharmasena to the Shivite fold. They

went to the King and lodged a complaint against Appar. The King ordered his police to arrest Appar and he was arrested duly. Appar faced hard times in the jail because he was mercilessly tortured. Yet, he did not submit. The king had second thoughts and he relented. Not only that, he disliked his Jain advisors. He gave up the Jain Dharma and became a Shivite. Appar survived and was released. Now he began his life as an ardent devotee of Shiva.

“Taking leave of his sister and Lord Civan (or Shivan) abiding in Thiruvathikai-Veerattanam. Appar began his ... pilgrimages to the shrines of Civan in Tamilnadu.” His Pilgrimages lasted for about 40 years. He in all visited 125 shrines, sang 312 decads comprising 3064 stanzas. He did not return to his starting point and could never meet his sister again. We now note some important events that took place during his prolonged travels.

During his long journey, visiting many shrines on the way, he reached Thillai (the present day Chidambaram) where he heard of a child prodigy Sambandhar. He went to Thiruppukali (Seekaazhai) to see the child. He reached on the auspicious day of the child's thread ceremony and greeted him. And, the child gave him his name Appar (father) by which he is known today. Appar lived for several days with Sambandhar and some scholar has noted that he was the child's guru. From Seekaazhai, Appar continued his pilgrimage and came to the river Cauvery along which he moved to visit many shrines. He arrived at Nalloor via Thiruchchatthimutram and received the Thiruvadi Deekshai from Lord Shiva. From Nalloor, he went to Thingaloor where he came accidentally across Appoothi Adikal, his greatest admirer. He lived for a few days with Adikal and continued his pilgrimage after taking his host's leave. He arrived at Thiruppukaloor after visiting some more shrines including the famous shrine of Thiruvaaroor. Here he met Sambandhar and told him of the glory of Thiruvaaroor. Sambandhar made his way to Thiruvaaroor and Appar stayed at Thiruppuukaloor until Sambandhar returned to him. Now Appar and Sambandhar continued the journey together covering a distance of some 63 km, seeing shrines on the way, and parted at a place called Thirumaraikkaadu. Appar continued his journey and visited many shrines and arrived at Thirupponthuruththi where he lived for a long time. He was fascinated by the place and established a mutt there. Here Sambandhar arrived and met Appar for the last time. At the suggestion of Sambandhar Appar went to Madurai. There, the King and the Queen received him. Taking their leave, Appar proceeded to Raameaswaram. Now “Appar retraced his steps northwards and arrived at Poompukaloor.” Here he breathed his last. The songs Appar sang at the various shrines during his long journey form the corpus of his work.

Appar's collected works are in books called Tevaaram (or Thevaram). It consists of 796 hymns. Of these, 383 hymns belong to Sambandhar (Book 1 to 3), 313 hymns belong to Appar (Book 4 to 6) and 100 hymns belong to Sundarar (Book 7). The individual hymn consists of ten or eleven verses. Each verse is made of a four-line stanza with a refrain. The Tevaaram hymns were collected some time between 1500 and 1600 AD. Earlier these hymns were collected in a book called Thirumurai (sacred text), which belonged to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In this narration what we find is that Sambandhar is given precedence over Appar in Tevaaram. This happens so because Sambandhar sang his first song at an age of 3 when Appar was yet a Jain. Yet, Appar's songs are superior in quality to those of Sambandhar. This is noted by G. Vanmikanathan, one of the Appar's biographers who said: “I must confess that nowhere in all his 383 decads does he [Sambandhar] reach the heights of devotion which characterizes every one of Appar's 980 stanzas of the 99 decads of Thirutthaandakams of the Sixth Thirumurai.” For this reason I have placed Appar first. In age he is senior to all other Naalvars.

In his long life, Appar stood for fearlessness, faith, humility, service and voluntary poverty. He told his deity Shiva in a song: “My duty is to serve and rest content. Thy duty on the other hand, is to hold me fast.” Though he was a humble man, he was no less than a very learned man and a philosopher. He considered his sister's manual service to the temple of high order and noble. He himself never failed to do manual service when he visited any temple. “With a hoe in his hand, he went round the shrines clearing the weeds, grass and prickles growing inside the precincts.” In short he lived a noble life.

Today Appar's songs are sung all over Tamilnadu and are much more popular than those of Sambandhar and Sundarar. Even then these do not show the height reached by

Maanikkavaachakar. Appar's songs also attracted Vinoba Bhava's attention. He knew Tamil and wrote about them in his Vinoba Sahitya in Hindi. I give the gist of his opinion here and put it under inverted commas even though these are not his actual words. He said: "These days we are reading Appar's Tevaaram. In it are collected his Bhajans, which are classified according to the shrines where he sang those songs. It means that he was always on the move and was not attached to any place. His aim was to spread Bhakti. Today we were told that Appar's birthplace is nearby and we came here. It is a great pleasure to be here and be familiar with his Bhajans. Then he elaborated on Appar's famous song, which I quote below and conclude:

Subject to any one we are not;  
 Death [God Yama] we do not fear;  
     In hell, tortures we shall not endure;  
     Tremble we do not;  
 Exult we shall; disease we do not know;  
     Submit we will not;  
     Joy eternal is our lot; sorrow is not for us;  
     Becoming irredeemable slave  
     Unto Sankaran of the distinction  
     Of being never a subject to any one,  
     Unto that King who has a ring of genuine conch  
     Pendant from one ear,  
 We have arrived at His twin rosy feet  
     Which resemble freshly picked blossoms.

- (2) **SAMBANDHAR:** Sambandhar was born in a place called Sirkaazhior (or Sirkazhi), which is near to the present day Chidambaram. His mother's name was Bhagawati and father's name was Sivapaadahridayar. His mother came from a village called Nanipalli. He was closely associated with Appar and I have covered the narration above. He also went round to various shrines and sang his songs there. Being a boy and energetic he covered more shrines than Appar could. He was also fortunate in having a companion named Tirunilakanta Yazhppaanar who accompanied him wherever he went. Yazhppaanar was an accomplished musician and accompanied Sambandhar on an instrument whenever Sambandhar sang. However, Sambandhar could not attain Appar's maturity as he died at the age of 16. His death took place on the day of his wedding to the daughter of Nampaandar Nambi. His biographer describes his death as follows: "Siva appeared as a great blaze of light and invited the saint, his intended bride and the entire wedding company to join him."

Sambandhar visited 219 shrines and sang 383 decads comprising 4152 stanzas. Being a Brahmin and a child prodigy, he received an early education, which he mastered in no time. He was very fond of debates and defeated many Jain monks in scriptural contests. This way he reconverted the Pandiyan King of Madurai to Saivism.

- (3) **SUNDARAR:** Sundarar was born a Brahmin. His father's name was Chadaiyanar and his mother's name was Ichainzaniyar. He was named Nambiyarurar. He lived in Thiruvaaroor but his birthplace was Thirunaavaloor. It is said that a King named Narachinga (or Narasinga) Munaiyaraiyar saw the child and was so charmed with his beauty that he adopted him. This way Sundarar grew up as a royal child and received the best education in scriptures like Vedas and in many other subjects. He like other nayanmars visited 83 shrines and sang 100 decads comprising 1026 stanzas. His hymns are autobiographical in nature and his biographers rely on these hymns and work out different biographies. We read below two versions.

"We can dismiss Sundarmoorthi Swaamikal with a word or two. ... by and large, a study of Sundarmoorthi Swaamikal's Thevaram leaves us with a feeling that we are listening to an importunate beggar, may be an imperious beggar, who was obsessed with his domestic problems, problems of courtship of two women, problems of marriage with two women, problems of the wherewithal to maintain two households." (G. Vanmikanathan)

"Cuntarar's [Sundarar's] life history is very interesting too. He belonged to the eighth century AD and was a Brahmin by birth. According to legend his parents arranged a

marriage for him according to family customs, but Siva stopped it. However, later with the help of Siva himself, he married two women, Paravaiyar and Cankiliyar. The former belonged to a clan of concubines while the latter belonged to a Vellala family. He led a happy family life and at the same time emerged as a great Saiva saint. He too sang several devotional songs of which only 1026 are now available. Cuntarar mentions in a song "Oh Lord you are the sheet anchor of my lady love Paravaiyar and me." He always dressed himself like a bridegroom, enjoyed the pleasures of worldly life and glorified the grace of Siva in his songs. Ideas regarding renunciation and life negation are rare in his hymns. All his hymns like Tirunanacampantar's Tevaram possess a pleasant music and a pleasing rhythm. Cuntarar, like Campantar described the many shrines in their beautiful scenic settings. It was his habit to sing and ask for his mundane requirements from Siva. However he detested and sang against the poets who approached the houses of rich men for favours. Cuntarar exhorts in many poems that instead of relying on mortal men for favours, however rich they might be, poets should depend on Siva for eternal grace. ..." (Mu. Varadarajan)

These are two versions of Sundarar's biography. The former tells us that his life was problematic whereas the latter tells that it was happy. I leave it to readers to choose between these two versions. What we know for certain is that his songs are popular and some of them are sung today. The first song he sang begins with the words 'piththa piraichudi'. The two other popular songs of his are Tanenai (Ahiri) and Ponnar meniyan (Pantuvrali). In his songs his signature words are "Thiruran" or "Thirunavalur".

After visiting Appar's birthplace, Vinoba also visited Sundarar's birthplace the next day because the latter is 5 to 7 miles away from the former. He found this land very sacred because two saints were born there. He was also reminded of the similar place in the Poona District of his own Maharashtra where two saints Jnandev and Tukaram were born within the range of 10 miles.

- (4) **MAANIKKAVAACHAKAR:** Maanikkvaachakar's period is uncertain because research scholars do not agree among themselves. Some put him in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century and others put him in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century AD. He was born at Vadavur in the Pandiya Kingdom. For this reason he was called as Vadavurar. We know very little about his early life. What we can surmise is that he was a very learned man and the Pandiyan King came to know about his fame. He invited him in his court and made him the Prime Minister of his kingdom. He, in turn, discharged his duties to the satisfaction of the king and his populace. The king honored him with the title "Thennavan Brahmarayan" ('Leader among brahmins in the South').

Maanikkavaachakar was not enamored with his high office or with his vast learning but was looking for a spiritual guru who would enlighten him. Once the King asked him to go to a port in his kingdom to buy good horses and gave him lot of money to cover the purchase. During the journey he came to a place called Perunthurai (Avudaiyarkoil) in the Aranthanki Taluk of the Pudukottai District. There he came across the guru whom he was searching for all his life. He became the disciple of this guru and began his life as the devotee of Shiva. He forgot of his mission and began to spend money on the construction of a temple. The king came to know of his Prime Minister's doings and he ordered his men to arrest him and bring him to the court. He was arrested and punished but later the King Varakunan II (AD 862-880) realized his mistake and tendered his heartfelt apology and freed him.

The freed devotee of Shiva left Madurai and traveled again to Thirupperunthurai and visited the Kuruntha tree under which he had found his Guru. Now he dedicated his entire life in the worship of Lord Shiva. He sang devotional songs all his life and these are collected in a book form and named as Tiruvachakam (or Thiruvachakam). Since then he is also called Maanikkavaachakar. In his old age he lived in Chidambaram and perhaps died there. This is in brief what we know about him. But he has left works, which have made him, immortal. We now read about the merits of his works.

First, what is Tiruvachakam (The Sacred Speech)? It "is an anthology of prayer hymns grouped into 51 sections. The 656 verses composed in conventional meters but with a song quality all their own, combining the praises of Siva with the poet-saint's biographical details."

“Maanikkavaachakar’s major work is the Thiruvaachakam, a hand-book of mystical theology. It is the account of a soul groping its way to union with the Godhead. Almost every one of the 656 stanzas reduces us to tears. Such is the effect of the pathos, of the yearning, of the self-condemnation, of the faith in God. All these are unparalleled in the volume of devotional literature in Tamil.” (G. Vanmikanathan)

“Pilgrimage to the shrines of Lord Civan is not the theme of the Thiruvaachakam. ... [It] is the biography of a soul in its search for and travels to union with the Godhead. It is the story of a spiritual bride and a divine bridegroom, their courtship and ultimate union, the bride in this case being Maanikkavaachakar.” (G. Vanmikanathan)

The effect of the aforesaid work on its reader is so great that a proverb has come into being, which says, “Those who are not moved by Tiruvacakam will never be moved by any other poem.”

A North Indian like Vinoba Bhave too was moved by this work. He has written extensively, in his own work Vinoba Sahitya, about it. He was pleased to note that there are about 200 songs for children who could sing them during their playtime. Among these there are some songs called ‘porcunnam’, which is “sung while pounding the fragrant flour. In the same manner ‘povalli’ is sung while plucking flowers. ‘Ucal’ is a swing-song. Others like ‘rumpi’, ‘tellenam’ ‘tonokkam and ‘calal’ refer to games played by young girls.” (Mu. Varadarajan)

Vinoba Bhave has also taken note of Maanikkavaachakar’s another work called Tiruvempavai. This work is similar to the Vaishnav saint Andal’s Tiruppavai. “Tiruppavai extols the greatness of Vishnu and Tiruvempavai speaks about Siva.” We conclude by quoting a poem from Tiruvempavai as rendered in Varadarajan’s book.

Oh maids! Are you still sleeping?  
Though you have heard our  
Song of praise to our Lord, who  
Has no beginning or end.  
When she heard the story, in praise  
Of the Lord echoing the streets  
She has cried in rejoice, lost herself  
And remained in stupor in her bed.  
It has been her condition.  
What an astonishing state is it?

## ALVARS

The twelve Alvars were Poykai, Potam, Pey, Tirupaan, Tirumazhisai, Tondar-adi-podi, Kulacekaran, Periyalvar, Andal, Tirumangai, Nammalvar and Madhurakavi. Of these, we narrate the life of three, namely, Periyalvar, Andal and Nammalvar. Among the twelve alvars, Nammalvar is considered to be the greatest. Andal (Antal), was the woman devotee, whose songs are ranked to be the highest. And, Periyalvar is the foster father of Andal. Of the twelve Alvars, “Eleven of them have sung of God and one, Madhurakavi, of his spiritual preceptor, Nammalvar.” The devotional songs of these Alvars are collected in the *Naalaayira Divya Prabandham*, which is called Divya Prabandham or just Prabandham. The word Alvar has two meanings. The one is the devotee who is immersed in love of God. And the other is the one who rules. A third is one who has plumbed the depths. As such we know very little about these Alvars except their works. A. Srinivasa Raghavan wrote: “Details of their lives and the dates of their birth and death are lost in the mists of time. The months and the stars under which they were born are given in some accounts.” We begin with Periyalvar.

- (1) **PERIYALVAR:** Periyalvar (9<sup>th</sup> Century) was born in Villiputthoor. His father was Mukunda Bhattar and his mother was Padmavalli. He was named Vittuchittan (Sanskrit form: Vishnuchitta). He was married and his wife was Vrajai. By profession he was a gardener and a priest attached to a temple in Villaputthoor. He enjoyed in making all kinds of garland and put them round the neck of his Lord and sang devotional songs before the idol. These songs are collected in his Tirumoli (or Tirumozhi).

Once, when he went to collect flowers in his garden he heard a child crying. He went in that direction and found a girl child under a basil (Tulsi) bush. He picked up the child and took her to his home and gave her to his wife. They named her Kodai, which means 'flower garland'. They brought up this child lovingly and her life we will narrate a little later.

Periyalvar, like Surdas in the north, was a master in composing songs on the child Krishna. He thought of himself as Yasoda, the mother of Krishna, and wrote songs on his beauty, lullabies and childhood pranks. We give below three songs. The first one 'invites the women to see Kannan's beautiful feet:

Devki is like the nectar that came out  
Of the ocean. She gave away Kannan (for safety) to  
Yacotai, the lady with a beautiful plaited hair. Oh  
Maidens with coral lips come and see Kannan  
Sucking the toes of his lotus like feet. (Mu. Varadarajan)

The second one is a cradlesong:

Siva has sent you these strings of beads  
And garlands of flowers. Oh Kanna! You  
Have bestowed your grace on me. Don't cry,  
Kanna sleep! ...

With loving care  
Brahma has sent  
That cradle of gold  
Inlaid with ruby and diamond  
Oh! As the great dwarf  
You measured the universe, sleep. (Mu. Varadarajan)

'The cradle songs of the Alvars are sung in the Neelambari raga.' The third one is on Yasoda's love of Krishna:

Though I am Kannan's mother, I have sent him to  
The forest to herd the cattle  
Without thinking that his legs would ache  
What a cruel thing I have done! (Mu. Varadarajan)

The name Periyalvar means the elder one of the Alvars. The word Periya stands for great in Tamil. And, Periyalvar fulfilled the honor given to him in bringing up his adopted daughter not only lovingly but also brilliantly. The daughter surpassed the father in creativity. We now look into the life of the daughter.

- (2) **ANDAL:** Andal (9<sup>th</sup> Century) was the adopted daughter of Periyalvar who was found under a basil bush as noted earlier. Her foster father brought her up very lovingly. She used to wear flower garlands, which were made for the Lord and her father used to scold her when she appeared before the mirror to find out how she looked. She replied that she was married to her Lord and she would never marry any man. For this reason she is also known as "chutikkottuttanachiyan" and this means "she who offered the garland to god after she had worn it." Her name, as given to her by her parents, was Kodai (the gift of Mother Earth). However, she is remembered as Andal because "the word 'Andal' (she who rules) ..." Her life span was only 16 years and it is said that she was 'absorbed into the stone image of Vishnu' when she was taken in her bridal attire to the Srirangam temple. The father lamented for the loss of his daughter and sang before the Lord: "I had an only daughter and goddesslike I brought her up; the fair eyed god has taken her." We know very little besides the oft-said legend. What we know is her works and we consider them now.

Andal's famous work is called Tiruppavai. It is a 30 stanza long song. The word Tiruppavai means "the song for pavai," where 'pavai' stands for 'doll.' "Here, it refers to a sand image of the goddess constructed by young girls on the riverbank, early each

morning, as part of a religious observance ... The ritual performed on every day of the month of Margazhi (December-January).” (K. Meenakshi)

We read now from the Tiruppavai:

Oh young maidens of Ayarpati, come for  
Bathing on a full moon day in the month  
Of Markali. Nantakopan’s son, as well  
As Yacotai’s young lion, who is called  
By several names as Kannan and Narayanan  
Will give us drum to celebrate the  
Pavai festival. Therefore, let us have our  
Ritual bath, and be praised by the world.  
Oh maidens come. (Mu. Varadarajan)

Vinoba Bhave has praised Andal for not forgetting her friends and taking them along while worshipping god. He said that she was so selfless that she wanted to share with her friends the grace of god. This is the essence of group worshipping.

We read one more Tiruppavai song:

Thrice a month, there will be rain, if  
One were to sing about Tirumal, who once  
Measured the universe assuming a universal  
Figure, and to perform the pavai  
Ritual. The fish will jump hither and  
Thither in the rice fields among the  
Luxuriant paddy. After drinking honey,  
The bees sleep in the midst of lotus  
Flowers. The cows in the shed when milked,  
Yield pots and pots of milk. Our prayers  
Will improve the riches of the country.

Vinoba Bhave liked Andal’s Tiruppavai so much that these songs were published in the Devanagiri script at his suggestion. During December-January, women in Vaishnava, or Srivaishnava homes, as they are known, sing the Tiruppavai song every day. Also, many radio stations in Tamil Nadu broadcast the entire song each morning. The Tamil Vaishnav temples too hold special celebrations throughout the Tamil land during the said months and ‘Andal is worshipped along with Krishna.’ This is then the merit of Andal’s work. We now read a scholarly estimate of Tiruppavai.

Periyavaccan Pillai said: “Alvars realized the Supreme, only when He awakened them from their slumber of worldly life and revealed Himself to them. Whereas Antal woke up the Supreme and made known her distress. Therefore she is admired more than the other Alvars.” Pillai further added: “since love between a man and a woman is more natural than between two men, Antal’s loving devotion to Visnu is more delectable than that of the male-Alvars.”

Andal’s another work “Nachiyar Tirumozhi” is not so well known. It contains ‘14 songs with a total of 143 stanzas.’ The Nachiyar Tirumozhi means ‘song of the goddess.’ Its 6<sup>th</sup> song ‘is a dream related by the heroine to her friend. She dreams of her wedding to Vishnu. It gives an elaborate account of the wedding ceremony. This song is recited at Tamil Vaishnava marriages even today:

Today and in endless future births  
Our Lord Narayana, my Nambi  
Will be my constant companion-  
With his holy lotus hands  
Upon the ammi stone he placed my Foot-  
This dream I dreamt, my friends.’ (K. Meenakshi)

From the foregoing narration we see that Andal is worshipped almost as a Goddess in Tamilnadu.

- (3) **NAMMALVAR:** Nammalvar means our alvar. He is considered to be the greatest among the 12 alvars and is a legendary figure. Yet we know nothing about his life except the oft-repeated legends. In the words of his biographer A. Srinivasa Raghavan: 'Nammalvar's life as it was lived in the light of common day, with all the details of the earth that he touched, is not available to us.' He further added: "Modern biographical and historical research trying to get at what it would call the facts of Nammalvar's life stands balked. Time has swallowed the factual details and what is now presented is the idealized account..." We read now this idealized account in the words of A. K. Ramanujan:

"According to historians, Nammalvar, was born into a peasant caste (Vellala) and lived approximately AD 880 to 930. Some would date him a century earlier. Although the facts are hazy, the legends are vivid and worth telling. According to these latter, he lived for only 35 years. He was born in Tirukurukur (today's Alvarthirunakari, in Tamilnadu), into a princely family in answer to their penance and prayers. When he was born, the overjoyed mother gave him her breast but the child would have nothing of it. He uttered no sound, sat if seated, lay if laid down, seemed both deaf and mute. The distressed parents left the child at the feet of a local Visnu idol. Once there, he got to his feet, walked to a great tamarind tree, entered a hollow in it and sat like a yogi in a lotus posture, with his eyes shut and turned inward."

In short, Nammalvar called Maran in his early life and later Satagopa and Parankusa was born in a place called Tirukkuruher on the banks of the Tamraparni in the Tirunelveli district in Tamilnadu. His father, Kariyar, was a sad witness to watch his son's unusual condition. We do not know his mother's name. Maran remained, with his eyes closed, under a tamarind tree, near the temple of Adinata at Tirukkuruher for his first sixteen years. A saint called Madurakavi happened to come there and spoke to Maran who responded to him. He opened his eyes and began to discourse with him. He found the boy to be so learned that Madurakavi became his disciple. Nammalvar remained under the said tamarind tree for the rest of his life. And, Madurakavi, his disciple wrote works in the praise of his master. This is in brief the life of Nammalvar. We now continue with Ramanujan's narration.

"... master and disciple found each other; the master broke his life-long silence and poured forth more than a thousand hymns to Visnu. Thousand magnificent hymns, each beginning with the last word of the previous one, were one continuous poem—an icon for the endless, ever-changing forms of the Lord."

Nammalvar's fame and importance were such that his images were installed in South Indian Vishnu temples soon after his death and revered as the very feet of God. 'In these temples today every worshipper's head receives the touch of a special crown that represents Visnu's feet and our alvar; it is named catakopam after him.' Up to this day his poems are chanted in temple services and processions. A ten-day festival is especially devoted to his work at the Srirangam temple every year. A professional chanter called avaiyar (king), 'dressed in ritual finery, sings and enacts the hymns for the listening image of Lord Visnu.'

Nammalvar has left behind four famous works. These are (1) Tiruviruttam (Tiru Viruttam), (2) Tiruvasiriyam (Tiru Asiriyam), (3) Peria Tiruvantati (Peria Tiru Antati) and (4) Tiruvoimozhi (Tiru Voi Mozhi). A Srinivasa Raghavan has explained the meaning of Tamil names of these works very well and we would like to follow him. "The 'Tiru' that serves as prefix in the names of the four works means 'good', 'auspicious', 'divine'. 'Viruttam' and 'Asiriyam' are two kinds of verse; the first two works therefore are named after the verses in which they are written. 'Peria' in 'Peria Tiru Antati' means 'great' and 'antati' is a characteristic of a certain kind of Tamil verse in which the last word or syllable of a stanza is taken up as the opening word or syllable of the next stanza. 'Voi Mozhi' in 'Tiru Voimozhi' means that which is uttered. 'Tiru Voimozhi' means therefore 'the Divine Word'." Tiruviruttam is a poem, which has a hundred four-lined stanzas. It means a message or an event. Tiruvasiriyam is also a poem and it has "71 lines in seven unequal sections, the first of fifteen lines, the second, third, fourth and seventh of nine lines each, the fifth and the sixth of ten lines each." Peria Tiruvantati is the next poem of 87 stanzas.

In this case, each stanza is called a 'venba' in Tamil and is a four-lined verse. Tiruvoimozhi is the acme of Nammalvar's works. It is considered to be very important and it is the longest. Raghavan tells us that "It consists of 1102 four-lined stanzas in various kinds of 'viruttam' verse. The stanzas called 'pasurams' occur in-groups of eleven, one group having thirteen stanzas being the only exception. Each group is known as 'tiruvoimozhi' and ten such groups together are called a 'pattu' (ten). Thus 'Tiruvoimozhi' has ten pattus, a hundred tiruvoimozhis and 1102 pasurams." The last stanza of each tiruvoimozhi is called a signature stanza and one reads in it a line as 'the servant of the servants of the servants of the Lord.' These signature stanzas have impressed Vinoba Bhave so much that he admired the immense humility of Nammalvar.

Nammalvar's philosophy is contained in the following words: "Come poets, if you want to live, labor with your hands and earn your bread with the sweat of your brow. Why sing a rich man's praises? And who is really rich on this earth? I see no one. Sing of your gods." We read now a few poems from Tiruvoimozhi.

I grope for Him  
Where, where can I see Him  
My lord of the discuss? ...  
I cry and with tears in my eyes  
I look around everywhere.  
It is a vain quest.  
Sinner that I am  
I do not see Him... (Raghavan)

The clouds that ranged in the enveloping vast of sky  
Blow loud their trumpet.  
The deep sea lifted up its wave-hands  
And danced in joy  
When they who loved the Lord—  
Sustainer of the seven worlds  
He whose praise endures,—  
Turned home to him (Raghavan)

He is the Origin without origin,  
Incomparable.  
He is the origin of all that are.  
If the cosmos falters  
And tends to turn to topsy-turvy,  
He, by Himself, can recreate it.  
Who on the earth can measure Him? (Raghavan)

Many scholars have praised and written commentaries on Tiruvoimozhi over a millenium. It is impossible to do justice to all these scholars here for the want of space. We simply note some well-known names. These are Sri Pillailokacharya, Sri Vedanta Desika, Sri Manavala Mamuni and Sri Alagia-Manavala-Puru-Perumal Nayanar. The last scholar wrote: "It [Tiruvoimozhi] is not a mud-pot but a vessel of gold." A non-Tamil person, Vinoba Bhave read Tiruvoimozhi and was moved so much that he has left his estimate of the work in his Vinoba Sahiya. Since I can read Vinoba Bhave's work, I give its gist here. He wrote we read in Tiruvoimozhi the experiences of the great Bhakta of Tamilnadu, Nammalvar. It is one of the best collections of devotional songs in the world. If Nammalvar's ideas and thoughts were not there, then Sri Ramanuja would not have been there. And, if Ramanuja had not been there, then Nammalvar's ideas would not have spread as much. Nammalvar wrote extremely sweet devotional songs in the Tamil language but his name is not known in the northern part of India. However, his student's (Ramanuja) students' (Tulsi, Kabir) thoughts we all know.

It is said that Nadmuni of the famous Srirangam temple heard a few songs of Nammalvar. These songs moved him so much that he decided to collect all the works of Alvars. This 'compilation was called "The Four Thousand Divine Composition" (Nalayira

Divyaprabandham), or the shortened to the “Four Thousand” (Nalayiram) or the “Divine Composition” (Divyaprabandham).’ Nadmuni’s grandson Yamuna was attracted to Ramanuja’s personality and wanted him to become a successor after his death. And, Ramunuja agreed to become his successor after Yamuna’s death. This way Ramanuja got associated with the Srirangam temple. And, ‘Sri Ramanuja’s indebtedness to it [Tiruvoimozhi] in his interpretation of the Vedas and the Gita has been widely acknowledged.’

We end this long discourse with an interesting remark of Vinoba Bhave: Whatever fountains of ‘Bhakti’ that is seen in Tamilnadu is due to Nammalvar. And, it is indeed wondrous. This movement did not remain confined to Tamilnadu but spread to countries wherever the people of the Tamil land went. We note here what Mu. Varadarajan wrote in his History of Tamil Literature: “Both Tiruppavai and Tiruvempavai became popular during the period of the Imperial Colas, who ruled South India from the ninth to the twelfth century AD. When the Cola king Rajendran (1014-1044 AD) captured Kataram the Tamils settled down there. (Kataram is perhaps the present day Kedah on the West Coast of West Malaysia.) It is perhaps through them that pavai poems have spread to Thailand or Siam. For several centuries the Siamese have been celebrating a festival known as triyempavatripava, without knowing its actual significance. During this festival they recite like mantras the corrupted forms of the poems of Tiruvempavai and Tiruppavai. This attests to their popularity even in such distant countries in those ancient periods.”

## **RESUME**

In the foregoing pages we have traced in detail the history of ‘Bhakti’ in Tamilnadu. And, this was the beginning of the ‘Bhakti’ movement in India. Later, as recorded in “Bhagvat Mahatmaya” (I, 48-50), “Bhakti was born in Dravidaland, grew to womanhood in Karnataka and Maharashtra, and became old in the Gurjara country. On reaching Vrindavan, she again became a young and beautiful woman.” This clearly shows that the ‘Bhakti’ movement is indigenous to India and the works of nayanmars and alvars form then the genesis of the ‘Bhakti’ movement in India.

## DHARMA

Indians had no religion. They were not in need of one. They had Dharma instead of a religion. And they went on changing Dharma at their sweet will. Even today a Vaisnav may become a Jain and no one will take notice of it. No family member will get upset. The family relation remains intact. In a home a man may be a Shivite and his wife may be a Vaisnav and they can live without any conflict. Even in remote past, Vedic Indians became Buddhist or Jain and at one stage the Buddha Dharma was at its zenith and at another stage the Jain Dharma was at its zenith. No doubt, at times, some persecution took place but then the king regretted and took up the religion of the persecuted persons. And the populace followed the king. In this manner India has passed through many phases and Indians on the whole lived a peaceful existence. Perhaps, the people living on the borders of India knew the Indian attitude towards Dharma. And whenever persecution took place in those lands, the people migrated to India knowing well that they will be able to practice their religion without hindrance. This way Jews came first, then came the Syrian Christians. Still at a later date Parsis came to India and settled down without hindrance. In course of time they all became Indians. They did not interfere with the Dharma of the existing populace and the host populace did not interfere with the religion of the migrants. This way people lived in peace in India.

Sometimes after the advent of Islam, Muslims came to India. They did not bring their religion with them only but also their polity because Islam is not only a religion but also a polity. They began to impose Islam on the existing populace and the conflict began. This conflict persists to this date. Later Portuguese came and they brought the European Christianity in India and they too began to impose their religion on the Indians. This conflict too persists to this date in a milder form. It is during this troublesome period that the most of the medieval saints lived and they saved the Indian Dharma from extinction. Vinoba Bhave has noted their contribution in the following words: Namdev, Nanak, Kabir and Tulsidas, these four saints' combined efforts, stopped the religious invasion of Islam. This is the one great thing they did. Vinoba's words are in Hindi and for that reason I haven't placed them under inverted commas.

The Indian Dharma has many forms and these medieval saints belonged to one or another forms. Whatever may be the form, they all recognized the following scriptural texts: Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Gita and Bhagwat. These texts are written in Sanskrit and I do not know Sanskrit and I haven't read them. In other words I do not know these texts. Yet, I am familiar with them through the works of three great Indians and I name them. They are Swami Vivekanand, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. India has produced many great men throughout its chequered history but during the period 1850 and 1950, these three men are the greatest in my opinion among many great men lived then. They have left deep impression on me and my ideas are colored with their writings. Here, I would like to present the Indian Dharma through the writings of these great men. Among the three, Vivekanand came first into my life when I was a boy of 14. I came to know the name of Rabindranath Tagore when I was going to Ramkrishna Asharam in Khar, Bombay. I was then 18. I came to know Sri Aurobindo through the tributes paid to him by Rabindranath Tagore. I begin with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) because he is the eldest among the three although he became famous at a later date as compared to the other two.

Rabindranath Tagore said:

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प्राचीन भारतवर्ष अनेक विषयोंमें असामान्य था, इसमें कुछ संदेह नहीं । अन्योन्य देशोंमें सभ्यताकी सृष्टि नगरोंमें हुई है और हमारे देशमें जंगलोंमें । सर्वत्र ही वसन, भूषण और ऐश्वर्यका गौरव है, पर भारतवर्षमें विवसन, निराभरण और भिक्षाचारका गौरव है । अन्यान्य देश धर्म विश्वासमें शास्त्रोंके आधीन है और आहार, विहार तथा आचारमें स्वाधीन ; पर भारतवर्ष विश्वासमें स्वाधीन है और आहार विहार तथा आचारोंमें सर्वतोभावेन शास्त्राधीन । इस प्रकारके अनेक उदाहरणोंसे यह सिद्ध किया जा सकता है कि साधारण मानव प्रकृतिकी अपेक्षा भारतीय प्रकृति अनेक विषयोंमें स्वतंत्र है ।

The inadequate translation of the above Hindi version is: "Ancient India was in many respects out of ordinary. In this of course there is no doubting whatsoever. In other countries, civilization grew in the cities whereas in our country in the forests. ... In other countries, religious faith was dependent on scriptures and in food etc was totally free. But India is totally

free in religious faith but in day-to-day behavior totally dependent on scriptures. In this manner it is possible to prove giving many examples that Indian nature is independent in many respects from others.”

In the above Hindi quote Rabindranath Tagore has very ably showed the difference between Dharma and Religion. He further said: “The religion that only comes to us from external scriptures never becomes our own; our only tie with it is that of habit. To gain religion within is Man’s great lifelong adventure. In the extremity of suffering must it be born; on his life-blood it must live, and then, whether or not it brings him happiness, the Man’s journey shall end in the joy of fulfilment.” The biographies of Indian saints illustrate this great lifelong adventure. Further, Dharma always aims for perfection. And Tagore said: “For our perfection we have to be vitally savage and mentally civilized; we should have the gift to be natural with nature and human with human society.”

Rabindranath’s father Devendranath Tagore accidentally came across the first verse of Isa Upanishad and this changed his life completely. He began studying Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures with the help of Sanskrit scholars. In course of time he came to be recognized as Maharshi Devendranath Tagore. He passed on his learning to his son Rabindranath Tagore who said of Rig-Veda as under:

“A poetic testament of a people’s collective reaction to the wonder and awe of existence. A people of vigorous and unsophisticated imagination awakened at the very dawn of civilization to a sense of the inexhaustible mystery that is implicit in life. It was a simple faith of theirs that attributed divinity to every element and force of nature, but it was brave and joyous one, in which the sense of mystery only gave enchantment to life, without weighing it down with bafflement—the faith of a race unburdened with intellectual brooding on the conflicting diversity of the objective universe, though now and again illumined by intuitive experience as ‘Truth is one: (though) the wise call it by various names’.”

He further said: “ ... he [Maharshi] wanted us to love truth with our whole hearts; he knew that mere acquiescence without love is empty. He also knew that truth if strayed from, can be found again, but a forced or blind acceptance of it from the outside effectually bars the way in.”

Rabindranath Tagore quoted often the wisdom from Upanishads in his writings. One of the quotes is: “The question how the truth of man is revealed was answered by Upanishad when they said: ‘And he who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in all beings, he does not remain unrevealed’.”

Tagore was so sure of his country’s inheritance that he said: “India is destined to be the teacher of all lands.” The above narration is Tagore’s brief introduction to what is Dharma. Now we pass on to Swami Vivekanand (1863-1902).

As noted earlier, Vivekanand came into my life when I was a boy of mere 14. To be exact, I was then, less than 14 by two months. I had come from Africa by a steamer during wartime (January 1942). And, when my mother presented me before my maternal grand father, he gave me a biography of Swami Vivekanand in Gujarati to read. Perhaps, he wanted me to be familiar with the religion and culture of India. Whatever might be his intention the life of Vivekanand touched me very deeply. The reason for this I might not have understood then but to day I see it at least hazily. Whenever, we traveled by train I saw beggar children crying and beating their breast and doing all odd things. This shocked me. I was asking my mother do these children have no mother to give them food? My mother instead of answering my question simply gave them some money so that they go away. I did not persist with my question because I saw immense sorrow on her face. But I could not forget the scene from my mind because I had not seen such a view before in my life. When I read Swami Vivekanand’s biography he touched on this problem of poverty again and again. And he had solution to remove this poverty too. What I read was in Gujarati and it is not possible for me to reproduce those Gujarati sentences here because that book is not with me today. But the near English sentences I can quote and I do so below:

“India wants the sacrifice of at least a thousand of her young men—men, mind and not brutes.”

“The essential thing is renunciation—without renunciation none can pour out his whole heart in working for others. The man of renunciation sees all with an equal eye ... At your very threshold, Narayana Himself in the form of a poor beggar is dying of starvation! ... Why, that is beastly!”

This made my life. Have I lived that life people who have seen me have to decide!

Now I come to Vivekanand's speech on September 11, 1893 delivered at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in U.S.A. It reads:

“... I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of the millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.

“... I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation, which has sheltered the persecuted, and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to the southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion, which has sheltered and still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings:

‘As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths, which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to thee.’

“The present convention ... is in itself a vindication ... of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita:

‘Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.’

“Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. ...”

The main point to note in the above speech is Dharma regards all religions as true. We see that a religion never regards any other religion as true. This is the fundamental and the most significant difference between Dharma and Religion. Now we see the impact of the above speech on the people in America and in India.

Jawaharlal Nehru noted in his book, *Discovery of India*, the impact of Swami Vivekanand's speech, which we read below:

“In America he [Vivekanand] was called the ‘cyclonic Hindu’. In India “he came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past.”

Further Nehru wrote: “He preached the monism of the Advaita philosophy of the Vedanta and was convinced that only this could be the future religion of thinking humanity. For, the Vedanta was not only spiritual but rational and in harmony with scientific investigations of external nature. ‘This universe has not been created by any extra cosmic God, nor is it the work of any outside genius. It is self-creating, self-dissolving, self-manifesting, One Infinite, Existence, the Brahman.’ The Vedanta ideal was of the solidarity of man and his inborn divine nature; to see God in man as the real God-vision, man is the greatest of all beings. But ‘the abstract Vedanta must become living—poetic—in everyday life, out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology.’ India had fallen because

she had narrowed herself, gone into her shell and lost touch with other nations, and thus sunk into a state of 'mummified' and 'crystallized' civilization."

"What our country now wants are muscles of iron and nerves of steel, gigantic will which nothing can resist, which can penetrate into the mysteries and the secrets of the universe, and will accomplish their purpose in any fashion, even if it meant going down to the bottom of the ocean and meeting death face to face." (Vivekanand [V])

"And here is the test of truth—anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually and spiritually, reject as poison, there is no life in it, it cannot be true. Truth is strengthening, Truth is purity, and truth is all knowledge. ... These mysticisms, in spite of some grains of truth in them, generally weakening, Go back to your Upanishads, the shining, strengthening, the bright philosophy; and part from all these mysterious things, all these weakening things. Take up this philosophy; the greatest truths are the simplest things in the world, simple as your own existence." [V]

"I would rather see every one of you rank atheist than superstitious fools, for the atheist is alive, and you can make something of him. But superstition enters the brain is gone, the brain is softening, degradation has seized upon the life. ... Mystery-mongering and superstition are always signs of weakness." [V]

In the foregoing narration we read Vivekanand's exposition of Vedanta and his expectation of Indians what they should be because of Vedanta, which stands for Truth. Now we read in brief his writings on the scriptures.

**VEDAS:** (a) The Vedas are, in fact, the oldest sacred books in the world. (b) There is no religious idea preached anywhere, which is not found in the Vedas. (c) The Vedas are the only exponent of the universal religion. (d) Veda means the sum total of eternal truths. (e) Veda is of the nature of Shabda or of idea. (f) All that is called knowledge is in the Vedas. (f) We are all brothers in the Vedas.

**UPANISHADS:** (a) The first step in getting strength is to uphold the Upanishads, and believe—"I am the soul", "Me the sword cannot cut; nor weapons pierce; me the fire cannot burn; me the air cannot dry; I am the Omnipotent; I am the Omniscient." (b) Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom are the watchwords of the Upanishads. (c) The path of the Upanishads is the pure path. (d) The Upanishads are the great mine of strength. (e) There is no religion of fear in the Upanishads; it is one of Love and one of knowledge.

**VEDANTA:** (a) The Vedanta only can be the universal religion. (b) This Vedanta, the philosophy of the Upanishads, I would make bold to state, has been the first as well as the final thought on the spiritual plane that has ever been vouchsafed to man. (c) Not only is Vedanta the highest philosophy in the world, it is the greatest poem. (d) Vedanta does not say, "Give it up": it says, "Transcend it." (e) Vedanta formulates, not universal brotherhood, but universal oneness. (f) Vedanta teaches the God that is in everyone, has become everyone and everything. The one central ideal of Vedanta is this oneness. (g) The Vedanta says, there is nothing that is not God.

**GITA:** The Gita is like a bouquet, composed of the beautiful flowers of spiritual truths collected from the Upanishads. (b) Than the Gita no better commentary on the Vedas has been written or can be written. (c) Work, work, work, day and night, says the Gita. (d) This knowledge of Atman is the highest aim of the Gita. (e) This is the central idea of the Gita—to be calm and steadfast in all circumstances, with one's body, mind, and soul centered at His hallowed feet!

**RAJA-YOGA:** In the study of this Raja-Yoga no faith or belief is necessary. Believe nothing until you find it out for yourself.

**KARMA-YOGA:** Karma-yoga is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness and by good works. The karma-yogi need not believe in any doctrine whatever. He may not believe even in God.

**BHAKTI-YOGA:** Bhakti-yoga does not say “Give up”; it only says; “Love, love the Highest!” Bhakti-yoga is natural, sweet and gentle.

**BHAKTI:** (a) the great quality of Bhakti is that it cleanses the mind. (b) Hatred is a thing, which greatly impedes the course of Bhakti. (c) Bhakti can be more easily practiced by persons in every condition of life.

**BHAKTA:** (a) Wherever there is beauty or sublimity, to him (Bhakta) it is all His. (b) “Everything is His and He is my Lover; I love Him,” says the Bhakta. (c) The Bhakta in this state of perfect resignation, arising out of intense love to God, and to all that are His, ceases to distinguish between pleasure and pain in so far as they affect him. He does not know what it is to complain of pain or misery; and this kind of uncomplaining resignation to the will of God, who is all love, is indeed a worthier acquisition than all the glory or grand and heroic performances. (d) No Bhakta cares for anything except love, except to love and to be loved. (e) He who wants to become a Bhakta must be strong, must be healthy. (f) The person who aspires to be a Bhakta must be cheerful. (g) The Bhakta loves the Lord because He is lovable.

**YOGA:** (a) The aphorisms of Patanjali are the highest authority on Raja-yoga, and form its text book. (b) Non-attachment is the basis of all Yogas. (c) Freedom of the soul is the goal of all Yogas. (d) Yoga changes the body. (e) Yoga is the science, which teaches us to get these perceptions. (f) Yoga can only be safely learnt by direct contact with a teacher. (g) The whole theory of Yoga is to go beyond the mind. (h) The end and aim of Yoga is to realize God.

**YOGI:** (a) A Yogi must avoid the two extremes of luxury and austerity. (b) To the Yogi everything is bliss. (c) The strong, the well knit, the young, the healthy; the daring alone is fit to be Yogis.

**MUSIC:** Music is the highest art and, to those who understand, is the highest worship.

The most of these quotations are taken from ‘Pearls of Wisdom’, The Ramkrishna Mission, Calcutta. Now we see how India appeared to Vivekanand. He said:

“This is the ancient land where wisdom made its home before it went into any other country. ... Here is the same India whose soil has been trodden by the feet of the greatest sages that ever lived. Here first sprang up inquires into the nature of man and into the internal world—and here the highest ideals of religion and philosophy have attained their culminating points. This is the land from whence, like the tidal waves, spirituality and philosophy have again and again rushed out and deluged the world, and this is the land from whence once more such tides must proceed in order to bring life and vigor into the decaying races of mankind.”

Vivekanand left deep impression on Sri Aurobindo who paid magnificent tributes to him and his mentor Ramkrishna Paramhans in his 30 volume works. To Aurobindo, Vivekanand was a spiritual lion and Ramkrishna the beginner of the new era of India. We now read Aurobindo’s (1872-1950) exposition of ancient India’s scriptures. Once again, we begin with Vedas.

**VEDAS:** This time we begin with Gayatri Mantra of Rig-veda. OM BHUR BHUVAH SWAH/ TAT SAVITUR VARENYAM/ BHARGO DEVASYA DHIMAH/ DHIYO YO NAH PRACHODAYAT/. This is in Sanskrit and its translation in English is as follows. “O Lord, who pervades the earth, the intermediate world and the world of light, we meditate on the supreme light of the illumining Sun-god, that he may impel our mind.” Of this Mantra Aurobindo said: “This ‘sacred Vedic formula, of the Gayatri’ was for thousands of years repeated by every Brahmin in his daily meditation; and we may note that this formula is a verse from the Rig-veda, from a hymn of the Rishi Vishwamitra.” Rabindranath Tagore too said: “I became very keen on repeating the gayatri.” He was then only 11.

Sri Aurobindo further said: “It means ‘we choose the Supreme Light of the divine Sun; we aspire that it may impel our minds.’ The Sun is the symbol of the divine Light that is coming down and Gayatri gives expression to the aspiration asking that divine Light to come down and give impulsion to all the activities of the mind.” He added:

“At the root of all that we Hindus have done, thought and said through these many thousands of years, behind all we are and seek to be, there lies concealed, the fount of our philosophies, the bed-rock of our religions, the kernel of our thought, the explanation of our ethics and society, the summary of our civilization, the rivet of our nationality, a body of speech, Veda. From this one seed developing into many forms the multitudinous and magnificent birth called Hinduism draws its inexhaustible existence. Buddhism too with its offshoot, Christianity, flows from the same original source. It has left its stamp on Persia, through Persia on Judaism, through Judaism, Christianity and Sufism on Islam, and through Buddha on Confucianism, and through Christ and mediaeval mysticism, Greek and German philosophy and Sanskrit learning on the thought and civilization of Europe. There is no part of the world’s spirituality, of the world’s religion, of the world’s thought, which would be what it is today, if the Veda had not existed. Of no other body of speech in the world can this be said.”

Finally, Aurobindo paid a grand tribute to the Vedic Rishis. He said: “They ‘may not have yoked the lightning to their chariots, nor weighed sun and star, nor materialized all the destructive forces in Nature to aid them in massacre and domination, but they had measured and fathomed all the heavens and earths within us, they had cast their plummet into the Inconscient and subconscious and superconscient; they had read the riddle of death and found the secret of immortality. ...”

**UPANISHADS:** “The Upanishads stand out from the dim background of Vedic antiquity like stupendous rock cathedrals of thought hewn out of the ancient hills by a race of giant builders, the secret of whose inspiration and strength has passed away with them into the Supreme. They are at once scripture, philosophy and seer-poetry.”

**GITA:** In the ‘Essays on the Gita’ Sri Aurobindo wrote: “Almost all spiritual problems have been briefly but deeply dealt with in the Gita, and I have tried to bring all that out fully in the Essays. He also said that Gita establishes a “harmony between the three great means and powers, Love [Bhakti], Knowledge [Jnan] and Works [Karma], through which the soul of man can directly approach and cast itself into the Eternal.” “We approach it for help and light and our aim must be to distinguish its essential and living message, that in it on which humanity has to seize for its perfection and its highest spiritual welfare.”

**RAJA-YOGA:** “All Raja-yoga depends on this perception and experience—that our inner elements, combinations, functions, forces, can be separated or dissolved, can be newly combined and set to novel and formerly impossible uses or can be transformed and resolved into a new general synthesis by fixed internal process.”

The above quotes give a fair idea of Aurobindo’s writings on the Indian scriptures very briefly. Now we see what he has to say of India. He wrote: “This great and ancient nation was once the fountain of human light, the apex of human civilization, the exemplar of courage and humanity, the perfection of good Government and settled society, the mother of religions, the teacher of all wisdom and philosophy. It has suffered much at the hands of inferior civilizations and more savage peoples; it has gone down into the shadow of night and tasted often of the bitterness of death.”

The readers may note that I haven’t given quotations from Indian scriptures. This is deliberate and I have good reasons to do so. In the first place, as stated earlier, I do not know Sanskrit and it is not fair on my part to quote Sanskrit text and then give translation of it from various authors. Also, many times the translations are very inadequate and give false impression. For me to rely on three great men of India too may appear inadequate to some persons. If so, I would like to point out that a very eminent Parsi jurist, Nani Palkhivala, too has relied on these three persons while speaking on the Indian spirituality. In his book ‘We the Nation’ he wrote: “Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo must have been thinking of him [Adi Sankracharya] when both of them said that the destiny of India is to be the spiritual leader and moral teacher of the world.” He has also noted Tagore’s quote, which I have given above and which tells us the same thing. He referred to one more person, C. Rajagopalachari, who observed: “If there is any honesty in India today, any hospitality, any chastity, any philanthropy, any tenderness to dumb creatures, any aversion to evil, any love to do good, it is due to whatever remains of the old faith and the old culture.”

Both Swami Vivekanand and Sri Aurobindo have said of India as mother of religions. This view might be repugnant to many modern Indians. They might think that these two great

sages are just boasting about the greatness of their country. If so, let us see the opinion of three well-known historians. I quote first an Indian Marxist historian, D. D. Kosambi. He wrote: "Its [Buddhism] legends induced parallel stories of Christ walking on water, the Christian saint's tale of Barlaam and Josaphat. The Essenian "Teacher of Righteousness" deduced by scholars from the Qumran (Dead Sea) scrolls bears a title precisely equivalent to that of Buddha (sasta or dhamma-cakka-pavattakka)—surely not by accident. The doctrines of Manicheism were certainly influenced by it, while Lukman of the Mohammedan may ultimately be the Buddha. The Barmecide minister whose empty feast in the Arabian Nights made the name into an adjective apparently came from a family of Buddhist abbots (paramaka) in Persia." Yet, Kosambi is an Indian and some might like to bypass him. Then let us see what an American historian Will Durant has to say. I cite below two quotes from him.

"India was the motherland of our race and Sanskrit the mother of Europe's languages, she was the mother of our philosophy, mother, through the Arabs of much of our mathematics; mother, through the Buddha of the ideals embodied in Christianity; mother, through the village community and democracy. Mother India is in many ways the mother of us all."

"It is true that, even across the Himalayan barrier, India has sent us such questionable gifts as grammar and logic, philosophy and fables, hypnotism and chess, and, above all, our numerals and our decimal system. But these are not the essence of her spirit; they are trifles compared to what we may learn from her in the future."

Now we read what a European historian, A. L. Basham, has to say of India:

"... our overall impression is that in no other part of the ancient world were the relation of man and man, and of man and the state, so fair and humane. In no other early civilization were slaves so few in number and in no other ancient law book are their rights so well protected as in the Arthashastra. No other ancient lawgiver proclaimed such noble ideals of fair play in battle as did Manu. In all her history of warfare Hindu India has few tales to tell of cities put to sword or massacre of non-combatants. The ghastly sadism of the kings of Assyria, who flayed their captives alive, is completely without parallel in ancient India. There was sporadic cruelty and oppression no doubt, but in comparison with conditions in other early cultures, it was mild. To us the most striking feature of ancient Indian civilization is its humanity. ... India was a cheerful land, whose people, each finding a niche in a complex and slowly evolving social system, reached a higher level of kindness and gentleness in their mutual relationship than any other nation of antiquity. For this, as well as for her great achievements in religion, literature, art and mathematics, one European student at least would record his admiration of her ancient culture."

In the above quote we note the words "one European student at least", which tell us that India hasn't received her due justice from many quarters. Now we pass on to a Chinese scholar, Lin Yu-tang's, view of India, which might not be palatable to today's China.

"India was China's teacher in religion and imaginative literature and world's teacher in Trigonometry, Quadratic Equations, Grammar, Phonetics, Arabian Nights, Animal Fables, Chess as well as in Philosophy and that she inspired Boccaccio, Goethe, Schopenhauer and Emerson."

From the above historical facts we see that Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekanand and Sri Aurobindo were and are right and they did and do enlighten their people. Also, they do tell their people what Dharma is and what they should follow in their day to day life. It is this Dharma that the medieval saints of India practiced and were the exemplar for the people of India. We now note what Jain Dharma has to say because India had more than one Dharma.

**JAIN DHARMA:** Jain Dharma is as old as the later Vedic period. In Yajurved we find the names of Jain's tirthankars: these are Rishabhdev, Ajitnath and Aristanemi. From Bhagwat Puran we come to know that Rishabhdev was the founder of Jain Dharma. This is all we know about the early Jain Dharma. A Jain scholar, Jagdishchandra Jain, clearly tells us that we haven't found any historical evidence so far for the first 22 tirthankars. This makes them the mythological figures and nothing more. This historical fact does not disturb devout Jains and they believe that Aristanemi was a cousin of Krishna and he was the 22<sup>nd</sup> tirthankar. The 23<sup>rd</sup>

tirthankar was Paswanath, the King of Benaras. His father was King Aswasen and his mother was Vamadevi. Paswanath (around 850 BC) ruled for 30 years and was a sraman for 70 years. He told his followers, not to kill, not to take away anything, which was not given to them, not to speak a lie and not to have material possession including a wife. Mahavir, (599-527 BC) the 24<sup>th</sup> tirthankar, changed these four-fold vows into five-fold. He split the fourth vow into two: not to take a wife and to reduce material wants to a minimum. Mahavir was born in a royal family. His parents were Siddhartha and Trishala. The historical Jain Dharma begins from the days of Paswanath and was given the final form during Mahavir's lifetime. This also makes the city of Benaras as old as 1000 BC. And the history of India too begins from 1000 BC. The earlier periods come under protohistory and prehistory.

Jain Dharma or belief is found in its Navkar Mantra.

Namo Arihantanam:	I bow down to Arihanta
Namo Siddhanam:	I bow down to Siddha
Namo Ayriyanam:	I bow down to Acharya
Namo Uvajjhayanam:	I bow down to Upadhyaya
Namo Leo Savva-sahunam:	I bow down to Sadhu and Sadhavi

Eso Panch Namokaro:	These five bowing downs,
Savva-pavappanasano:	Destroy all the sins,
Manglananch Savvesim:	Amongst all that is auspicious,
Padhamam Navel Mangalam:	This Navkar Mantra is the foremost.

The Jain considers this Navkar Mantra as the most fundamental mantra of their Dharma or faith. They recite it at any time of the day. The point to note is that a Jain bows to Arihanta and not to any God or even a tirthankar. Then we ask what this word Arihanta is and who is a tirthankar? Arihanta means a person who has destroyed all the inner enemies of man like ego or pride, greed or covetousness, anger or passions, envy or jealousy, lie or deceit, sloth and gluttony. To destroy these enemies Jains practice very austere achar or way of life. Tirthankar is an Arihanta and also the organizer of the Jain Sangha. The point to note here is that a Jain bows to a tirthankar when he bows to an Arihanta but not to an organizer of the Sangh. Hence the Jains do not say that I bow to Tirthankar. Also, when a Jain says that I bow to Arihanta, he means that he bows to any person, Jain or non-Jain, who has become Arihanta. He bows to other four too because they help him to become Arihanta if he aspires to be. This is then the Dharma and not a sectarian religion.

Today Jains are rich and they pride in building as many temples as they can and which they do not need. For them to become Arihanta is beyond their strength. They practice a few austere achars on some auspicious days and during some festivals. Otherwise, most of the times, Jains are busy making money. And they have divided themselves in two sects namely, Swetambar and Digambar. The Swetambar sect further got divided into Sthanakwasi and Terapanthi. Terapanthi do not believe in building temples. This is then Jain Dharma in brief. We now move on to Buddha Dharma, which is a grand simplification of Vedic and Jain Dharma. Before I take up Buddha Dharma, I would like to tell you how I happened to know it first hand. To get admission in the 6<sup>th</sup> standard of a High School in Bombay Presidency I was made to take Pali as a language alternative to Sanskrit. I did not make much progress in Pali but Buddha captured my heart and I got a chance to read a few Jatak Stories and some sayings of Dhamapada in the original. I would first present the words of Buddha, which touched me, the most. He said:

“As the wise test gold by burning, cutting and rubbing it (on a piece of touchstone), so are you to accept my words after examining them and not out of regard for me.” He further added: “Accept not what you hear by report, accept not tradition: do not hastily conclude, “It must be so”. Do not accept a statement on the ground that it is found in our books, nor on the supposition that “this is acceptable”, nor because it is the saying of your teacher.”

To a question posed by a Jain layman, Buddha replied: “How might one rightly say of me that the ascetic Gautama holds the principle of inaction? I proclaim of the non-doing of evil conduct of body, speech and thought. I proclaim of the non-doing of various kinds of wicked and evil things. ... I proclaim the doing of good conduct of body, speech and thought. I proclaim the doing of various kinds of good things.” To show the importance of love above good work he said: “All good works whatever are not worth one-sixteenth part of love which

set free the heart. Love, which sets free the heart, comprises them. It shines, gives light and radiance.” “As a mother, at the risk of her life, watches over her only child, so let everyone cultivate a boundless love towards all beings.” Once, the Buddha saw a monk suffering from dysentery and lying in filth. ‘He washed him and changed his bed with the help of his companion Ananda.’ Then he said to his disciples: “Whoever, O monk, would nurse me should nurse the sick man.”

Buddha never wanted his prestige to come in the way of his disciples’ progress. This becomes clear from the conversation between Buddha and one of his principal disciples, Sariputta. It goes as under:

“Such faith have I, Lord,” said Sariputta, “that methinks there never has been nor will be nor is now any other greater or wiser than the Blessed One.” “Of course, Sariputta,” is the reply, “you have known all the Buddhas of the past?” “No, Lord.” “Well then, you know those of the future?” “No, Lord.” “Then at least you know me and have penetrated my mind thoroughly?” “Not even that, Lord.” “Then why, Sariputta, are your words so grand and bold?”

Buddha told his followers not to get angry with those who abuse him or to criticize anyone else’s creed. The following few quotes testify to it very amply.

“Brethren, if others speak against me, or against my religion, or against the Order, there is no reason why you should be angry, discontented, or displeased with them. If you are so, you will not only bring yourselves into danger of spiritual loss, but you will not be able to judge whether what they say is correct or not correct.” “On one of his rounds he was repulsed by a householder with bitter words of abuse. He replied: ‘Friend, if a householder sets food before a beggar, but the beggar refuses to accept the food, to whom does the food then belong?’ The man replied: ‘Why, to the householder of course.’ The Buddha said: ‘Then, if I refuse to accept your abuse and ill will, it returns to you, does it not? But I must go away the poorer because I have lost a friend’.”

“It [criticism of other creeds] is, as a man who looks up and spits at heaven; the spittle does not soil the heaven, but comes back and defies his own person.” “When Siha the Jain becomes a Buddhist he is required to give food and gifts as before to the Jain monks who frequent his house.”

Buddha never tried to control his Sangh or Order for he said: “When I am gone, let the Order, and if it should so wish, abolish all the lesser and minor precepts.” Some time before his death he said to his followers: “Be lamps unto you.” His actual words are: “And whosoever, Ananda, either now or after I am dead, shall be a lamp unto themselves, and a refuge unto themselves, shall betake themselves to no external refuge, but, holding fast to the Truth as their lamp ... shall not look for refuge to any one besides themselves—it is they ... who shall reach the very topmost height! But they must be anxious to learn!”

A day before his death Buddha said: “Colorful and rich is India, lovable and charming is the life of men.” His last words were: “Brethren, decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your own salvation with diligence.”

In the above sayings we see Buddha as a man, compassionate and kind. We now look into Buddha Dharma. Buddha (623-543/44 BC or 567-487 BC) was a contemporary of Mahavir. His name was Siddhartha and was also known as Gautama. His father, Suddhodhana was a Raja of a small kingdom and his mother Maya died a few days after his birth. His mother’s sister, Mahaprajapati, who was also his stepmother, brought him up. With this brief introduction of Buddha we pass on to his Dharma.

**BUDDHA DHARMA:** This Dharma is known all over the world as the Middle Way. It means that a man always tries to wean himself with diligence from the ways of darkness and endeavors to take himself in the ways of light. It is not burdened with the Vedic or Upanishad’s philosophy or with the high austerity of the Jain. It is a pure Dharma a layman can easily understand. We see now its tenets.

#### **SALUTATIONS:**

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arhato Samma Sambuddhassa!  
(I bow to the Blessed One, the Perfect One, and the fully Self-Enlightened One!)

**MANTRA:** Buddham sarnam gacchami:  
(I go to the All-Enlightened One (=Buddha) for refuge).  
Dhamam sarnam gacchami:  
(I go to the doctrine for refuge).  
Sangham sarnam gacchami:  
(I go to the order for refuge).

**PANCHSHIL:** Panatipata veramani sikkapadam samadiyani  
(I undertake the rule of training to refrain from injury to living things).

Adinnadana veramani sikkapadam samadiyani  
(I undertake the rule of training to refrain from taking that, which is not given).

Kamesti micchachara veramani sikkapadam samadiyani  
(I undertake the rule of training to refrain from sexual immorality).

Musavada veramani sikkapadam samadiyani  
(I undertake the rule of training to refrain from falsehood).

Sura-meraya-majja-pamadatihana veramani sikkapadam samadiyani  
(I undertake the rule of training to refrain from liquors, which engender slothfulness).

**THE EIGHTFOLD PATH:** It consists of eight steps, which lead to Self-enlightenment. These are Right Understanding, Right Thoughts or Motives, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Means of Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Recollection and Right Meditation. These steps are fully explained in the Buddhist scriptures.

**THE DHAMMAPADA:** This is the most famous scripture of Buddha Dharma. I will quote only a few verses from it to give some idea of it.

Never in this world can hatred be stilled by hatred; it will be stilled only by non-hatred—this is the Law Eternal.

The man who talks much of the teaching but does not practice it himself is like a cowman counting another's cattle.

Like beautiful flowers, full of color but without scent, are the well-spoken words of a man who does not act accordingly.

Even though a man is richly attired, if he develops tranquility, is quiet, subdued and restrained, leading a holy life and abstaining from injury to all living beings—he is a Brahman, he is a Sraman (acetic), he is a Bhikkhu.

In the last verse Brahman signifies a Hindu, Sraman signifies a Jain and Bhikkhu signify a Buddhist. Buddha sees what one practices and does not bother about the distinction in various Dharmas. Vinoba Bhave was much impressed by this verse and he admired Buddha's extreme humility.

This is then in brief Buddha Dharma. All Dharma practices Patanjali's Yoga because it is a science, as Vivekananda pointed out earlier. Yoga teaches how to practice meditation and each Dharma wants his followers to meditate according to his need. Hence, we touch upon Yoga very briefly.

**PATANJALI YOGA SUTRA:** The basic Sutra or tenet of Yoga is Ahimsa or non-violence, Satya or truth, Asteya or non-stealing, Brahmacharya or freedom from lust and Aparigraha or freedom from useless wants. A yogi is supposed to take these five vows. Besides, these five vows, he has to follow a strict regime of Yama or death of desires, Niyama or discipline, Asana or sitting posture during the practice of pranayama, Pranayama or breath-control and Pratyahara or withdrawal of senses. In these, Yama is gained by following the basic Sutra honestly. Niyama consists of shauch or cleanliness, santosh or contentment, tapa or austerity, swadhyaya or self-study and ishwara pranidhana or immersions in divine.

A yogi who follows the above regime gets ready for Dharna or concentration and Dhyana or meditation. The Dharna and Dhyana lead him to Samadhi or the final absolute divine Bliss.

The above brief exposition clearly explains what Yoga is. In India, practically all aspirants, irrespective of their Dharma, practice Yoga and the medieval saints too were familiar with Yoga. Outside India too, in recent times, Yoga is very popular and is used for regaining robust health.

**RESUME:** In the above write-up, we have considered the three main Dharmas of India. The Vedic Dharma approves God and is theistic. The Jain Dharma does not approve God and is atheistic. Its thirthankars are called Jin—the conquerors of passions—from which the word Jain is derived. The Buddha Dharma follows the Middle Way and is silent about God and is agnostic. Here, we have omitted the Sikh Dharma, which came into existence during the medieval times and we will take it up with the life and works of Nanakdev, who was its founder.

We are now ready to take up the life and works of the Medieval Saints of India. Some Indian scholars, including Vinoba Bhave, thought that the Buddha Dharma is a bridge between the teachings of these saints and the Advaita Vedanta.

## CHAPTER 1



**Area: 78438 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 28,655,528 (H: / M: 30.9%) Source: Census 2001**

### SHANKARDEV (1449-1569)

Shankardev was one of the greatest saints of India. Among saints of India his versatility is amazing. He was an able administrator of his estates, a social reformer, a poet, a dramatist, a musician, a painter and an amateur actor. He was the founder of the Vaishnav Dharma in Assam and laid the foundation of its culture. He gave Assamese people their ethics, literature, songs, dances, music and even musical instruments. He built monasteries where Assamese could practice their culture and elevate themselves to a higher spiritual life. By introducing Vaishnav Dharma in Assam he integrated Vaishnav of Assam with the Vaishnavs of the rest of India. He introduced the Bhakti Movement in the remote corner of India and thereby integrated Assam with the rest of India. In short, he is the maker of Modern Assam. Later Assamese have built upon his foundation.

### BIODATA

Name: Shankarvar

Birth Place: Bardova

Birth date: October 1449

Mother's Name: Satyasandhya

Father's Name: Kusumvar

Teacher's Name: Mahendra Kandli

Works: Harischandra Upakhyan, [dramas: Chinha-Yatra, Patniprasad, Kalidaman, Keligopal, Rukminiharan, Parijatharan, Ramvijaya], Kirtan Ghosha (his magnum opus), Gunmala, Bhaktipradip, Anadipatan and his Sanskrit work 'Bhakta-Ratnakar'

Death Place: Kochbihar

Death date: September 7, 1569

### EARLY LIFE

Shankardev was born in a leading family among the Bhuyan noblesse called Bhuyan Sardars. His father was a Kayastha chief and an able administrator. Unfortunately, Shankar lost his parents in his childhood and his paternal grandmother, Khersuti, brought him up lovingly. He was a playful and mischievous child and spent most of his time in taking cows to pasture. One day, when he was already 12 years old, his grandmother said to him: "Your father, grandfather and great grandfather were learned men and able administrators and you, even at the age of 12, have remained a good for nothing boy. Do you want to throw away the great family reputation to dust?" These words of his grandmother touched Shankar deeply. He made up his mind to become a good student. He was admitted in a learned Brahmin,

Mahendra Kandli's school (tol pathshala). In the beginning he found hard to adjust to this new life, but with dint and determination he became a good student. He now impressed his teacher and classmates with his learning. His teacher asked his classmates to call Shankar as Shankardev.

We do not know what he might have studied in his school. But going through his many works we might safely assume that he went through the studies of Veda, Upanishad, Sanskrit grammar and literature, Ramayan-Mahabharat, Puran and allied subjects. He was now able to write good poetry and his biographer tells us that he wrote Harischandra Upakhyan during his school days. This is to say that he was already a learned man when he left his school.

### **SHANKARDEV AS AN ADMINISTRATOR**

It was time for Shankar to take up the family duties of a chieftain (Barbhuyan). He did not relish this work much but his relatives and well-wishers asked him to marry and take up the administration of his estates soon. He agreed and carried out his duties admirably when Ahoms and Kacharis were establishing as independent rulers. It was his genius that he survived among these unreliable factions. In the meanwhile he married a beautiful Kayastha girl named Suryavati who gave birth to a daughter. She was named Manu and had one more name Haripriya. Unfortunately, Suryavati died soon after giving birth to the child. This shocked Shankardev and he lost interest in mundane life. But he had to bring up his daughter and he waited to make himself free until she grew up.

When Haripriya came to proper age, she was married to a young Bhuyan named Hari. Shankardev now entrusted his home duties to his son-in-law Hari and his administrative duties to his uncles Jayant Dalpati and Madhav Dalpati. This way he freed himself from his family life and was preparing for a long pilgrimage.

### **PILGRIMAGE**

In 1481, when Shankardev was 32 years old, he set out from his home to go on a long pilgrimage to various important shrines in India. He was accompanied by seventeen companions. Among these were his teacher Mahendra Kandli and his family priest's son Ramram Vipra. The latter was his lifetime close friend. I do not know any detail of their wanderings but it could be surmised that they visited Jagannath Puri because it is the foremost shrine in the eastern part of India and Kashi, which is the greatest centre of Pilgrimage in India. In one of his songs, Shankardev wrote: 'In Orissa, Varanasi and in other sacred shrines, devotees sing devotional songs (bhajan) composed by poets.' In Badrikashram, he wrote his first devotional song (bargeet): "O my mind, you take refuge at the feet of Ram."

It seems that Shankardev and his friends wandered all over North India and then settled down in Jagannath Puri for a considerable period of time. This was a meeting place for pilgrims from all India and they brought with them various faiths and beautiful devotional songs. Here he accepted Lord Jagannath as his Guru and God. He also read the famous exposition of Bhagvatpuran named "Bhagvat-Bhavarthdipika" of Shridharswami, who was a Mahant of Puri's Goverthanmath. These experiences broadened his knowledge of new Vaishnav movement in India. And, sweet devotional songs (bhajans) of different regions awakened in him his spiritual quest. After 12 years of wandering he returned home an enlightened new man.

### **RESUMPTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE DUTIES**

When he returned home around 1493, his grandmother was still alive. She told Shankar to marry again and resume his administrative duties. His people, Bhuyans, also insisted in his resuming administration. For love of his people he resumed his duties but his heart was not in his new responsibilities. He had seen a new Vaishnav Movement in North India and its beneficial impact on people. This had chalked out for him a new path and he was determined to follow it. Along with his duties, he was spending much of his time in reading and discussing various scriptural texts. For his convenience, he built a small temple in a lonely place where he could meditate and discuss scriptures. Such a place later came to be known as 'Satra'.

In 1497, at the age of 48, he married again, perhaps, to please his grandmother. Kalindi was the name of his second wife. They had three sons, Ramanand, Kamal-lochan and Haricharan. Kamal-lochan died young. Haricharan lived with his mother and looked after her. Ramanand was in the service of Kochbihar's prince Chilarai.

One day a man named Jagdish Mishra arrived from Puri to meet Shankardev. He was a Brahmin from Tirhut and a disciple of a sanyasin of Vishnupur. The sanyasin was the editor of a work called 'bhagvat bhakti-ratnakar'. Mishra brought with him a copy of Bhagvat Puran along with Shridhar's Bhavarathdipika. It seems that Shankardev had asked someone to procure a copy of Shridhar's work when he was in Puri. Now Mishra came to deliver it to Shankardev.

Jagdish Mishra remained with Shankardev in Bardova for almost a year. They went through Shridhar's work carefully and discussed the various points to clarify the basic meaning of Bhagvat. Shankardev now came to believe firmly that Bhagvat's message of 'eksharan' (refuge to only One) is the finest and the best. This helped him to formulate his own philosophy. He began to write in people's language beautiful poems with different rhymes to spread the fundamental principles of Bhakti. It is said that during this period he wrote his first drama with the name 'Chinha-Yatra'. He drew the background paintings for the stage, trained his relatives and disciples in music and dance and asked the instrument makers to make new kind of musical instruments for him. He directed this drama and acted at times as Vishnu. This drama attracted many people and a few of them became Shankardev's disciples. This way he became a free and frank preacher of Vaishnav Dharma.

Now Shankardev was not in a position to attend to his administrative work fully and had to relegate some work to his relatives. But his relatives were not as good as administrators as he was. Hence, they came into conflict with Kacharis. And, they had to pass through a period of some disturbance. When Shankardev realized that peace with Kacharis was impossible he asked his Bhuyan people, residing around him, to migrate with self-respect to the north of Brahmaputra River where some Bhuyans were ruling. This happened sometime during 1516-1517 period. With it Bhuyan rule came to an end on the southern bank of Brahmaputra River, in the middle part of Assam.

For sometime Shankardev and his followers lived with Bhuyans of the north. But Kochs under the leadership of Vishvasingh were becoming powerful. A new threat had arisen, which made the refugee group to move towards the Ahom Kingdom. There, they settled at a place called 'Gangmo', which was near the present day Vishvanathghat. Here too, they found that they were not safe. Hence, they thought that they should find an island in the Brahmaputra River, which would be a safe place because of water all around. They moved now towards east and found an island called 'Majuli' in the Brahmaputra River. Bhuyans and Vaishnavs settled now at places called 'Dhuvahat' and 'Belaguti'. These places do not exist today because these were washed out in 1915 during the floods in the Brahmaputra River. Anyway they found these places safe at that date and Shankardev's Panth (congregation) began to flourish.

The great event that took place in the said island was Shankardev's meeting with his foremost pupil Madhavdev. At that date the latter was 32 and the former was 72. Madhavdev had come to Shankardev to defeat the latter in philosophical and religious arguments. The acrimonious arguments between the two lasted for more than four hours and finally Madhavdev accepted his defeat. He was won over not only in arguments but also by the remarkable personality of Shankardev. Henceforth, Madhavdev devoted his entire life at the feet of his Guru and later, after Guru's death, he carried forward his works. We would narrate Madhavdev's life in a separate chapter. Here, we continue with Shankardev.

Shankardev received immense help from the learned Madhavdev. The latter had a melodious voice and a large number of people gathered to hear sweet devotional songs from this gifted disciple. Shankardev's Panth now began to spread far and wide. Also, Shankardev did not discriminate people on the basis of his birth. He had said that untouchables too have a right to worship God (chandal paryant kari haribhakti adhikari). This helped many marginalized people to join him and improve their lifestyle. He assured these people that there was no need to become a Pandit (scholar) in scriptures but Hari-Bhakti (devotion to God) was enough. To help these people he rendered Bhagvat Puran and other sacred

scriptures in Assamese songs and poetry. Thereby, these marginal people began to sing songs and to read poetry. All these activities lifted people all around.

These activities of Shankardev were enough to make other Purohits (priests) jealous. This was and is the usual story everywhere and we would touch upon it briefly. The Purohits approached the Ahom King Suhummung (1497-1539) and lodged their complaint against Shankardev. The latter was brought before the King. Shankardev defended himself very ably and impressed the king with his nobility and he was released very gracefully. The king admonished the Purohits for making false accusations.

Many Bhuyan followers of Shankardev had given up the political activity but a few of them still enjoyed a limited independence from the Ahom rule and were administrators. The Ahom Kings gave Shankardev's nephew, Jagtanand, a title of 'Ramrai' for his religious activities. Shankardev son-in-law, Hari, was in the service of the Ahom King. He was involved along with the Bhuyans of Dhuvahat and Narayanpur in looking after the enclosure of wild elephants. These Bhuyans were inexperienced in taking care of elephants and these animals ran away into the nearby forests. Hari and Madhavdev were arrested and were taken to Gadgaon. There, they were presented before the court. They were declared guilty. Hari was executed and Madhavdev being a saintly person was simply kept under arrest. Madhavdev sang before the officers of the kingdom Ramayan and managed his livelihood by begging. He was released after six months for his exemplary conduct. He made his way straight to Dhuvahat and reported the execution of Hari to his Guru. This news disturbed Shankardev deeply and he felt that he could live no longer in the Ahom kingdom. Only place where he could go now was the Koch kingdom.

The Koch king Vishvasingh had died in 1534. His son Malladev took the name Narnarayan and became the king of Kochbihar. Narnarayan's brother Shukaldhwaj, who was also known as Prince Chilarai or 'small king' became the General (Senapati) of the army. Both the brother princes received the best education in Kashi. Narnarayan could write excellent Stotra (poetic stanzas) in Sanskrit. Chilarai had written an exposition on Geetgovind titled Saraswati. Both were patron of art and literature. Shankardev had heard of the generosity and the nobility of these brothers and he was inclined to move to the Koch kingdom. An opportunity arose for Bhuyans to move to the Koch kingdom when Chilarai attacked the Ahom kingdom under the King Suklenmung (1539-1552) during the 1546-1547 periods. The Koch took over Ahom's Narayanpur itself. Bhuyans, who harbored enmity with Vishvasingh, were now ready to make friendship with his sons and join the army. One Bhuyan Sardar led the Koch battalion and blocked the Ahom battalion until Shankardev and his Bhuyan followers hurriedly left Dhuvahat in boats. They safely reached within the Koch boundary and lived at various places until they settled down in Chhunapose, which is called Barpeta today. Here the first work he did was to stage his drama 'Vipra-patni-prasad'. This was in response to the orthodox Brahmin priests. He also met here a rich, intelligent businessman named Bhavanand. He became Shankardev's disciple and proved very useful in gathering followers for the new movement. Shankardev called him 'narayan' and he became famous as Thakur Ata among Vaishnavs.

Shankardev did not live at one place but changed his residence twice until he settled down at Patbausi. Henceforth, this place became his permanent residence and he lived here for his last 28 years. Today, it is considered to be a holy place for Vaishnavs. This place, in the Koch kingdom, was congenial for Shankardev because it was peaceful and he wrote most of his outstanding works here.

## **PILGRIMAGE TO JAGANNATH PURI**

Shankardev now decided to embark on a second pilgrimage. He was nearing 100 and an old man. This time he took with him 120 devotees. They began their journey around 1550. Also, he did not go far but went up to Puri and remained there for a few months. The duration of the pilgrimage did not last for more than four or five months. He returned to Patbausi and resumed his unfinished works. He felt that he could rely on the generosity of King Narnarayan and his Diwan (Prime Minister) Chilarai for his peaceful existence in Patbausi but this was not to be. We see what happened.

## CONFLICT WITH NARNARAYAN

The orthodox Brahmin priests of Kochbihar could not tolerate the fame Shankardev enjoyed. They began to instigate the King Narnarayan. Once the king lost his temper and ordered his men to arrest Shankardev and bring him in the Court. Fortunately, Shankardev came to know the order in time and he left Patbausi immediately. The police could not arrest Shankardev but captured his two disciples, namely, Narayan Thakur and Gokulchand. They were tortured but they did not divulge the Guru's where about. As a punishment these two devotees were given to some businessmen from Bhutan in exchange of horses. The policeman who was guarding the devotees paid these businessmen rupees hundred and asked for their release. The businessmen too saw the innocence and nobility of the devotees and released them.

Shankardev now felt that it was safe to come out from the hiding and he returned to Patbausi. He lived freely for two or three months but the instigation of the King began once again. Again, the King lost his temper and asked his men to arrest Shankardev. This time Shankardev son, Ramanand, who was in the service of the Rajguru (King's Guru) Kanthbushan and Chilarai intervened. He informed his employers about the King's order. Chilarai immediately sent his men to Patbausi and brought Shankardev in a boat to his house.

Narnarayan now asked his brother Chilarai to hand over Shankardev to him. He assured his brother that he would do no harm to his sacred ward until the Court's decision. Shankardev decided to present himself in the King's Court. He did not take anyone else except his one attendant. Chilarai made all arrangements for his journey and his guest's comfort during this historic meet. Shankardev climbed the stairs of the Court's entrance humming his famous 'stotra madhu-danav-daran-devavaram' in 'totak chhanda'. His magnificent presence itself made the King to order one of the attendants to bring a seat for this famous Vaishnav and place it before him even though this was not the Court's practice. Before any talk could begin, Shankardev began to sing his own composed bargeet 'Narayan, Kahe Bhakti Karu Teri' (O God, how am I to do your bhakti (devotion)? Shankardev's presence, his devotional songs and his vast learning moved the King and he realized his mistake. To amend his folly the King asked Shankardev: "What could I do for you?" Shankardev said: "I should be given an opportunity to counter allegations made against me." The King suggested that Shankardev spend the mornings in his court and meet the orthodox Pandits and answer their questions and he spend the evenings with Chilarai. Shankardev agreed with the King. This way the Vaishnav Guru defeated all his orthodox opponents and assured them that he was not their enemy. This pleased the King. Narnarayan now became the patron of Shankardev's New Vaishnav Movement in Assam. Shankardev was now a free man and he could move easily in the Koch Kingdom as he pleased. This was the most favorable period for him to spread his message.

## LAST DAYS

Once again, the necessary peaceful and safe atmosphere became a reality for Shankardev and his followers. The new Vaishnav Movement gained momentum because of this congenial atmosphere and the friendship of the King and his brother. It spread all over Kochbihar and Kamrup. But this entailed more responsibility for the old man. He had to make to and fro journey often between the Koch Capital and Patbausi. When he was in the Capital he lived in Fulbari. Chilarai had built a small 'satra' (monastery) for Shankardev near the Capital. Later on, this place came to be known as 'Bhelandgastra' or simply as 'Bhela'. During the daytime Shankardev presented himself at the Court.

During this period Chilarai asked Shankardev to translate the Sanskrit work 'Janmapuran' in Assamese. Shankardev got it translated by his scholarly disciple Madhavdev because he was too old to undertake the task. Once again, his patron requested him to paint Krishna's childhood life in Brindavan on a 40 yard long cloth weaved by the weavers of Tatikuchi (Today's Berpeta). Later on this cloth came to be known as "Brindaban-Cloth. Pandit Kavichandra Dwij came from Shantipur Navdwip with his 60 learned followers in the Koch Capital. Shankardev carried out learned discourse with them and scored over them. It is said that Shankardev also wrote a drama 'Kansvath' in Patbausi but only songs of the drama are found.

In 1568, Shankardev undertook his last visit to Kochbihar when he was 119. On the way he spent a night at Ganak-kuchi where his foremost disciple Madhavdev's 'satragruha' was located. He had heart to heart chat with him. The next morning he said his last good-bye to his most beloved follower and parted from him. He sat in a boat and sailed downstream along the banks of Brahmaputra. He went to Bhela where he spent some six months. Here he followed his usual routine: in the morning he was in Narnarayan's Court and in the evening he was in Chilarai's Court. These were his last days. He wrote a drama 'Ramvijay', which was his 'hansgeet' (a type of song). This was written at the behest of Chilarai. It was performed with the help of Chilarai's actors and dancers. Perhaps, this was his last work.

Shankardev had two sons and any one of them could have succeeded him. But Shankardev was a foresighted man and chose the right man to carry out his unfinished mission. He named his foremost disciple Madhavdev as his successor. We would read Madhavdev's life in a separate chapter and see the merit of Shankardev's choice. For the present we note that Shankardev passed away on Tuesday, September 7, 1569 in Kochbihar. He was cremated on the bank of the Torocha River and the King had sent all the material for his cremation.

### **SHANKARDEV'S DISCIPLES**

Shankardev had trained many able disciples. Apart from Madhavdev, we note the names of his famous disciples: Damodardev (1488-1598), Haridev (1493-1568) and Anant Kandli. Damodardev broke away from Madhavdev and established a new branch. First he tried to settle down in the kingdom of the King Parikshitnarayan (1603-1616) of Kamrup but the king made him to leave his country. He went to the capital of Kochbihar and established there a monastery called Vaikunthpursatra. A monk (sadhu) named Vanmali from Vaikunthpursatra moved to east and established there a monastery called Dakhinvat under the patronage of the then ruling Ahom King. Damodardev had placed three disciples of his in his monasteries of Kamrup. Haridev too broke away from the main branch and established a few monasteries (satra) in the region formed by the present day Kamrup District. This way they spread the message of Shankardev.

Shankardev's family priest (kulpurohit) Ramram, who lived with him and remained a lifelong friend, did not leave the main branch and his descendents too followed the same path as Ramram. The monasteries (satra) of Patbausi and Barpeta were ably looked after by the descendents of Ramram.

Shankardev's own descendents did not remain behind. They considered Bardova, the birthplace of Shankardev, as their holy place and derived inspiration from there. Shankardev's grandsons, Pursottam and Chaturbhuj and Chaturbhuj's wife Kanaklata too established monasteries at different places with the help of their assistants. These satras were like self-sufficient temples.

This way, monasteries proliferated in the three kingdoms of Assam, namely Kamrup, Kochbihar and a part of Assam. And Shankardev became the founder of Vaishnav dhrama in Assam.

### **SHANKARDEV AND HIS FOLLOWERS**

Shankardev was a broadminded man and did not believe in caste or in ethnic discrimination. His and his disciples' followers came from all communities that lived in Assam. We note here a few names. Among the followers of Shankardev and Madhavdev, Chandsai and Jaihari were Muslims, Govind was from the Garo community, Jayanand was a Bhutia, Madhav, Jayanti were from the potter community, Shriram was a Kevarta and Damodar was from a community of businessmen. Later on, Shriramdev, one of the head of the monasteries admitted followers from the community of Nagas. In short, Ahoms, Kochs, Miris, Kacharis, Maranos and many other tribal people could join Shankardev's New Vaishnav Movement. Thereby, Shankardev became instrumental in bringing cultural unity among the Assamese people.

Among these Vaishnavs, a Brahmin or a Non-Brahmin could easily become the head of a monastery. In the same way a Brahmin could take the non-Brahmin followers and a non-Brahmin could take the Brahmin followers. The merit was the criteria and not the superiority of

birth. A Kachari King too had become the follower of Shankardev. And the Muslim, Chandsai, who was a tailor, had progressed to a high spiritual attainment. This way, it was truly a liberal movement.

In this movement distinction was not made between the monks and the house-holders. Shankardev was a house-holder, whereas, Madhavdev was a monk. Hence, house-holders or monks could easily become the heads of monasteries. There were no woman-head of monasteries but the granddaughter-in-law of Shankardev, Kanaklata, managed the monasteries in the Bardova region with the help of 12 men-managers.

## CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION

Shankardev's cultural contributions were many and it is difficult for me to do justice to them being a non-Assamese. I haven't heard any Assamese music or seen a dance or drama. We begin with music.

**Music:** Shankardev wrote 34 Assamese devotional songs (bargeets or bhajans) for which the ragas are indicated. We list a few of these songs:

- Narayan, how may I worship you? (Narayan, kahe bhakti karu teri, Raga Dhansri)
- Hari, I fell at your feet and request you: Save my life. (pave pari Hari karuho katri prana rakhibo mor, Raga Kedar)
- He only, he alone is my Master who speaks about God (soi soi thakur moi jo Hari parkasha, Raga Gouri)
- Pandit, you do not see straight path! (Oja, soja panth naheri, Raga Dhansri)
- See mother, Madhav is going to forest (herhu mai chalali Vipine Madhai, Raga Dhansri)

In these songs we see that Raga Dhansri is repeated three times. The Raga Dhansri belongs to a group of ragas made of Dhanasri, Bhimpalashi (Abheri in Karnatak music), Patdeep and Dhani. All these four ragas are very close in structure. Today Bhimpalashi and Patdeep are very popular but it seems that during Shankardev's times Dhansri or Dhanasri was much more popular than the other four. For instance, the famous bhajan 'ab me nachyo bahut Gopal' (I have danced a lot, Gopal) of Surdas (1468-1583) too was composed in Raga Dhanasri in those days. Surdas too was a Vaishnav saint who sang before his idol in Vrindavan.

Bargeet is sung in alap form in the beginning and then is followed by the song part of bargeet that is composed in some specific Tal (rhythm). Perhaps, for this reason, raga of the bargeet was indicated but not the rhythm (Tal). This is just a guess because exceptions were made in three bargeets where the rhythm (Tal) for three bargeets was also given. This mode of singing seems to be close to the Drupad style of the North Indian music—the difference in the Assamese style being the absence in naming of four parts of Drupad, asthai, antara, sanchari and abhog for the Bargeet. In the Assamese style only the third part is named as 'tolani' This closeness is not surprising because Shankardev's first bargeet was written in Badrikashram and at that time (1481-1493) the Drupad style had just begun in North India during the reign (1486-1516) of Mansingh Tomar.

Shankardev also wrote another type of song which is called 'ankiageet'. In this case both the raga and Tal are given. We list here two songs:

- God, what has happened to the princess? (Hari, Hari, kina bheli rajkumari, Raga Gouri, Rupak Tal)
- Mother, O Mother, how long could I live separate from Krishna? (Mai, Mai, Harik bichhuri kat rahbi, Raga Ahir, Aktali (Ak Tal))

**Dance:** Shankardev developed a dancing style also. This dance style is known as 'satra-dance-style' because such dances were performed in satra (i.e. in monasteries). Perhaps, this style went to Manipur when Vaishnav Dharma reached there. It developed then into Manipuri style of dancing and it is recognized as one of the four classical styles of India today. From this we might surmise that the Assamese satra-dance would appear in some respect similar to the Manipuri dance. During Shankardev's time the female part was danced by a male.

**Literature and Drama:** Shankardev's time is considered today as the dawn of Assamese literature. He wrote poems, songs, dramas, translations from the Sanskrit religious literature and stories in poetic form. His main work, Kirtangosha, consists of 25 parts. Each part consists of some devotional songs called Kirtan and one of the stories, which establishes a theme. Gunmala gives in all six sweet Kirtans. He also wrote poetic compositions (pads) in praise of deities and these are called Bhatima. Two Bhatima exist in praise of King Narnarayan. There are six dramas of Shankardev and these are not copied on the lines of the Sanskrit dramas but are original in a sense that they are totally Assamese. His works gave impetus to the Assamese literature and many writers wrote important works in Assamese later on.

**Paintings:** We have already said that he did paintings on a very long cloth depicting the life of Krishna in Vrindavan. He painted an elephant with natural colors and pasted it on a wooden bookcase, which he presented to the King Narnarayan. He had drawn seven paintings depicting the celestial home of Krishna, called Vaikunth. Later, this type of paintings became a rage in Assam and appeared in many Vaishnav books. This way the Vaishnav Assamese established their individual style of painting.

**Philosophy:** Shankardev followed Bhagvatpuran, Bhagvadgita and the Sahastranam portion of Padmapuran to establish the basic principles of his New Vaishnav Movement. These principles were: Aksharan (refuge to the One), Namsmaran (refuge to a name of God) and Satsang (gathering of Bhaktas to follow truth). For detailed clarification of the principles two commentaries, which carry the names Bhagvat-bhavarth-dipika and Subodhini were used. His new Movement became known by two names: Mahapurushia Dharma and Aksharan NamDharma.

Shankardev believed that hearing and reciting Kirtan (devotional songs) was sufficient to lift a man to a higher spiritual level. These means were easily available to commoners. And, they were not subjected to any strict regime. A novice was asked to have faith in four things, namely, Nam (name), Dev (deity), Guru and Bhakta (devotee). He was given a Guru-mantra—Ram-Krishna-Hari-Narayan. He was taught to consider himself as the servant of Krishna. Shankardev himself said: "Tomare bhrityara, bhrityara, bhrityara, tara charitya bailo ami moka, Jagannath nakara nairasa neriba Madhava swami" (O lord, I have become a servant of servant of thy servant. Do not disappoint and forsake me, O Lord of the Word). He also stressed on one Vaishnav tenet that no one attains self-realization unless God favors him with his grace.

**Social Reforms:** Shankardev's New Vaishnav Movement brought many changes in the Assamese society. People from diverse communities came together in the monasteries to sing devotional songs. They began to respect one another. The taboo of high and low disappeared. They shared 'prasad' (food offering to the God) from a lowly born person without any hesitation. They learnt that inner cleanliness requires also external day to day cleanliness. They gave up vices and many bad habits. This way the ideal of balanced life got established without insisting on unnecessary austerity. In short, people came to look upon other people as equal and this became a natural norm in Assam.

Vinoba Bhave went to Assam in 1961. He read the original works of Shankardev and Madhavdev. He being a Maharashtrian and not of Assam, his comments are interesting. For this reason I give them here. He said: from Shankardev's whole literature, one sentence has attracted my attention. And the quote is. "Rajniti Asurer Shastra" (politics is devil's workshop). He further said: In Assam two great men were born, Shankardev and Madhavdev, and these names are remembered in every home there but elsewhere in India, we people do not know them. Right from a child to an old man, something from the works of these two men is always there on everyone's tongue. And, Shankardev did not limit himself to the Assamese language but also wrote 'Bhakti-Ratnakar' in Sanskrit. Why?—he asked. His answer is: Sanskrit was the language of whole of India.

## LEGENDS

Shankardev was a saint and some legend is bound to be associated with him. For completeness of this biography I mention them here. There are two legends of which I am aware. The first is: Guru Mahendra Kandli saw a Cobra spreading its hood on the face of child Shankardev in order to protect him from the heat of the Sun. Seeing this the Guru realized the

greatness of the pupil and asked his other wards to call Shankar, Dev or Shankardev. The second is: Lord Jagannath of Puri asked Jagdish Mishra to deliver Shridhar's 'Bhavarth-Dipika' to Shankardev personally.

### **CONCLUDING REMARK**

In the foregoing pages we saw Shankardev's greatness, the impact of his personality on the people of Assam and the integration of his people and their culture with the rest of India through his New Vaishnav Movement. The point that remains to be answered is in what respect Shankardev's Vaishnav philosophy differed from the other Vaishnav philosophies of his times. Shankardev did not give any place to a female deity in his Vaishnav philosophy. In Chaitanyadev's Vaishnav philosophy Radha-Krishna played the central role; in Vallabhacharya's Vaishnav philosophy Swamini was given a place along with Krishna. These were then small doctrinal differences among Vaishnavs. But the overall similarities among them were many.

Finally, I ask myself here how much authentic is my presentation? This question is difficult for me to answer. I have relied on Dr. Maheshwar Niyog who is considered to be a reputed scholar of the Assamese language and literature. His book 'Shankardev' is available to me in a Gujarati translation by Bholabhai Patel. The book is published by National Book Trust, India. I have also relied on Vinoba Bhave as explained in the beginning of this book.

### **MADHAVDEV (1489-1596)**

Madhavdev was Shankardev's worthy successor. He carried forward his Guru's work further. It lasted for 28 years after his Guru's death. Shankardev loved his disciple much and called him his 'pranbandhu'—my life-brother. He also appreciated Madhavdev's vast learning and encouraged him to further his knowledge. A medieval poet said: "Shankare bhakti prakashila, matra Madhvese pracharila." (Shankar illuminated bhakti, Madhav propagated it only). Vinoba Bhave, commenting on Shankardev-Madhavdev pair, said: the best quality of a Guru is that the pupil goes further than the teacher. And, Madhavdev fulfilled this expectation and proved his Guru's greatness.

### **BIODATA**

Name: Madhav

Birth Place: a village in today's North Lakhimpur District of Assam

Birth date: sometime in 1489

Mother's name: Manorama

Father's name: Govind

School: One in the Rangpur District in today's Bangladesh

Works: Namgosha (magnum opus), Arjun-bhanjan, Chordhara, Pimparaguchuva, Bhumulutiva and Bhojan-vyavhar. Bramhamohan, Bhusanharan, Raszumura and Kotorakhelova are placed in his name.

Death Place: Kochbihar

Death date: sometime in 1596

### **LIFE**

Madhavdev's childhood was full of hardships. He had to do some agricultural work as a small boy. At the age of 15, he was given the task of collecting dues. In such circumstances he educated himself by attending a school in Ranpur or Rangpur. Since he distinguished himself in his later life, he might have studied there Sanskrit, Purans, Philosophy and some other works.

After his father's death, he began in trading in betel-nuts and betel-leaf. He was plying a boat on Brahmaputra from east to west in his country. During this period, he decided to meet Shankardev and defeat him in a debate. He was then 32 and his adversary 72. He was won over by Shankardev. Madhavdev decided then to become a devotee, gave up his profession and renounced a marriage offer. He remained a celibate throughout his life and lived with his Guru until his Guru's death.

Madhavdev, after his mentor's death, took over the duties of Shankardev and established his own monastery (satra) at Sundridiya (Barpeta) in Kamrup. Here he wrote his magnum opus, Namghosa, and other works. From time to time he used to visit the places around his own monastery. He built a temple with the specific object to stage dramas but this temple got converted into a 'Barpeta Satra' in a very short time. This peaceful time was not to last long and he had to prepare for confrontation soon.

Madhavdev was living in the kingdom of Kamrup. The king was Raghudevvarayan (1581-1603), the son of Chilarai (Sukaldhwaj). This king, after his father's death, quarreled with his uncle, the king, Narnarayan and declared himself as the ruler of Kamrup—the eastern part of the Koch kingdom. This upstart was temperamental in his behavior and was power drunk. Some adversaries of Madhavdev lodged a false complaint against Madhavdev before this upstart. The king ordered a police party to raid the monastery of Barpeta. The police could capture the property of little worth of the Vaishnavs living in the monastery. Madhavdev and some other monks were taken to the capital, Vijaypur, by boat. The adversaries withdrew their complaint against Madhavdev just before the proceedings began in the Court. Madhavdev was released honorably and the monks and Vaishnavs got back their worthless properties. Once again this whimsical king ordered Madhavdev to quit Barpeta at the earliest and go to live in Hajo where his Hayagrive-Madhav Mandir was situated. But, as the author Maheshwar Niyog humorously notes, saint Madhav attracted more devotees than the God Madhav.

Madhavdev realized that it was senseless to live in the kingdom of a whimsical King. He decided to cross over the boundary of the Kamrup kingdom and enter into the boundary of the Koch kingdom. This he did soon. Laxminarayan (1587-1627), son of Narnarayan, was the ruler of the Koch kingdom. In his Court Madhavdev engaged himself in theosophical disputes with many of his adversaries and defeated them with ease. The King was pleased and recognized Shankardev's New Vaishnav Movement as RajDharma (State-Religion) and granted patronages to two monasteries. This made Madhavdev's work smooth.

Madhavdev sent holy men all over the country to propagate Bhakti-marg (devotional path). Among these, Gopaldev of Bhavanipur, Padam Ata and another Gopaldev, who was known as Bansigopal, were the prominent ones. These three devotees and their assistants established many monasteries in the Ahom Kingdom, that is, the present day Assam. Some of these monasteries are very rich and it is said that these have many house-holder devotees. Madhavdev appointed his nephews (sister's sons) Ramcharan and Mathurdas as custodians of his temples of Sundridiya and Barpeta. Madhavdev died as his mentor Shankardev in Kochbihar in 1596.

## **NAMGHOSHA**

According to Vinoba Bhave, Namghosha is unique in the Assamese literature. Bhave liked it so much that he wrote 'Namghosa Sar' in Hindi. I give below some of the comments of Bhave:

- Namghosha is not a philosophical work. It is a work of devotion and prayer. Whenever incidental reference to philosophy is made in the work, it is in itself over complete.
- In Assam, in each village, there is a 'Namghar'—a house where Namghosha is recited. In it an idol is not kept.
- In the verse 348 of Namghosha, Madhavdev described his life-mission. He wrote: We are roaming joyfully on the royal path of 'Hari Bhakti'. The gentle light of 'Guru-pad-nakh-chandrika' is available for road guidance. Mother Shrutis' foot-steps are seen on the way. There is no question of falling.

## **NAMGHAR**

According to Maheshwar Niyog, institution of Namghar came into existence in every village as a kind of decentralization of the institute of Satra (monasteries). From the beginning Namghar became a centre of all human activities of a village. It was a theater house for performing dramas. It had a spiritual hold on the every member of the community and that prevented them from going on the wrong path. It was a kind of village democracy as well as a 'Nyayamandir' (judicial court). The decision of elders was respected by all and no

one dared to disobey it. In short, these two institutes of Satra and Namghar organized the Assamese society neatly and morally

### **CONCLUDING REMARK**

According to Vinoba Bhave the profusion of Vaishnav places of worship (i.e. 'satra' and 'namghar') in Assam were due to Madhavdev and he played the major role in spreading the Vaishnav Dharma in Assam. His 157 bargeets are sung in these temples today and his bhatima in praise of his Guru reminds the devotees of the greatness of Shankardev. In the month of Bhadrapad, on vad-panchami day, this great man's death anniversary is celebrated with devotion and faith, all over Assam.

I have relied on Dr. Maheshwar Niyog and Vinoba Bhave for the biographical material.

## CHAPTER 2



**Area: 88752 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 80,176,197 (H: 72.5% / M: 25%) / Source: 2001 Census.**

### JAIDEV (12<sup>th</sup> Century)

Jaidev was one of the greatest Sanskrit poets of India. His Gitgovind is known all over India and abroad. His two verses have found place in Guru Granth sahib. Yet we do not have his authentic biography. We do not know his birth date or death date. We know his birth place but we do not know his death place. It is assumed on the basis of circumstantial evidence that he lived in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Chologanga Dev. Some say he died in his native place; others say he died in Vrindavan. One thing is certain that his Gitgovind has played very important role in the Indian music, dance and Radha-Krishna worship. He has influenced poet like Vidyapati and many other religious luminaries. On what basis do we decide he was a saint? The answer is: Legends tell us that he was a Radha-Krishna worshipper.

### BIODATA

Name: Jaidev  
 Birth Place: Kenduli Sasan  
 Birth date: the first part of 12<sup>th</sup> century  
 Mother's name: Vamdevi  
 Father's name: Bhojdev  
 School: a pathshala in Kurmapatak  
 Works: Gitgovind (magnum opus); other works not known to me  
 Death Place: probably Kenduli Sasan  
 Death date: Not known

### LIFE

Jaidev lost his parents when he was very young. They had left behind for the boy a house. He was poor and his father had left a debt for him to cover. Niranjan, who was a lender, claimed the house to cover the debt and Jaidev readily agreed. In spite of Niranjan's

behavior Jaidev helped him in his difficulties. This made Niranjana to return Jaidev's ancestral home. In such poor circumstances Jaidev educated himself.

For his higher education, Jaidev went to a pathshala in Kurmapatak. He learnt there Sanskrit and other related subjects. He proved himself to be a very good student to the extent that he was employed as a teacher in the very pathshala. This information is surmised from the two inscriptions found in the famous Lingraj Temple. In the inscriptions, words like Kurmapatak Pravar and Sadhu Pradhan are mentioned for him. A third inscription there, along with the above two, suggests that he was closely associated with the family of Komi Nayak and to the pathshala at Kurmapatak

Kenduli Sasan or Kendubilva is situated near the river Prachi and the presiding deity is Ambica. The people of the village have built a temple in his memory and every year in the Indian month of 'Magsar (Sud padva)' a fair takes place when people in thousands gather there to remember him and his wife Padmavati.

## LEGENDS

- Jaidev began his pilgrimage to Jagannath Puri in the company of his friend Parasara. Somehow they got separated and Jaidev, being thirsty on a hot summer day, became unconscious. God Krishna himself came as a shepherd and revived him and accompanied him up to Puri and then disappeared.
- A Brahmin Sudev had a daughter Padmavati. Lord Jagannath told him in his dream that you give Jaidev your daughter in marriage. The Brahmin and his wife found Jaidev and told him of Lord's order. Jaidev protested but Sudev and his wife left their daughter with Jaidev and ran away. Jaidev had no alternative but to marry Padmavati.
- Once Jaidev was robbed and his limbs cut, he was thrown in a well. Somehow he survived and sat on a stone in the well and began to recite Radha-Krishna. A royal party went by the well and heard the recitation. The prince and the party rescued Jaidev and took him with them. Later Lord restored the limbs to Jaidev and he regained his original self. Jaidev also made his dead wife alive. Such legends are plenty in Jaidev's case and they do not make a biography.

I have based this narration on stray articles that I have read. I do not claim any authenticity. I have included this biography because Jaidev's work has played a very important role in the Bhakti Movement in India.

## CHANDIDAS (1339-1399)

Chandidas' fame rests on his one sentence, which has made him immortal. This sentence is: 'sabar upare manus satya tahar upare nai' (the supreme truth is man; there is nothing more important than he is). But who is Chandidas, we do not know for certain. There were four poets in the Bengali language who took the name Chandidas. All these poets wrote Chandidas in the customary autobiographical line (bhanita line) in their poems. And, confusion arose due to this fact. The four poets were: Baru Chandidas, Dwija Chandidas, Dina Chandidas and Chandidas. Of these four Chandidas, only Baru Chandidas 'has been more or less identified.' Yet, the mystery is not fully resolved. In 1916, a Bengali scholar, Basantaranjan Vidvadvallabh, published Baru Chandidas' manuscript, containing the lyrical Sri-Krishna-Kirtana, which he had discovered at Bankura. It was he, who believed that Baru Chandidas was born in 1339 and died in 1399. Other Bengali scholars did not agree with him and suggested different dates of Baru's birth.

## BIODATA

Name: Baru  
Birth Place: Nanur, a village in the Birbhum district of West Bengal  
Birth date: tentative, sometime in 1339  
Mother's name: Not known to me  
Father's name: Durgadas Bagchi  
School: Not known to me  
Works: a manuscript of Krishna-Kirtan  
Death Place: Not known to me  
Death date: tentative, sometime in 1399

## LIFE

We do not know about Chandidas' childhood or boyhood. Chandidas was a priest in a temple of the goddess Bashuli (Bishalaksi). He fell in love with a washerwoman named Rami. Many troubles arose for him on this count. Finally, Chandidas was excommunicated and he left his village with Rami.

Chandidas' poems or songs, which number 1100, are popular in Bengal and he is recognized as one of the poets of the Bengali language today. A school and a hospital exist in Nanur as memorials to Chandidas and people visit the village to pay homage to the poet-saint.

### **CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU (1486-1533)**

Chaitanya was a saint who had captured the heart and mind of the Bengali people. He was a saint to whom ecstasy (meditation-trances), devotion (sadhna) and love for Radhakrishna was natural. He passed on these characteristics to the Bengali populace. Even today a Saraswata branch of Chaitanya's tradition is alive. Bhaktivedanta Sarasvati Thakur established this branch and his disciple, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, took Chaitanya's teachings to the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prabhupada's Movement in the West is known as The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). And, the followers of ISKCON have built their temples the world over. Now, a new academic subject called Krishnology is created and is taught in a number of institutions. A Bengali Muslim scholar, Salimullah Khan, has summed up Chaitanya's influence in Bengal in the following words: "Sixteenth century is the time of Chaitanya Dev, and it is the beginning of Modernism in Bengal. The concept of 'humanity' that came into fruition is contemporaneous with that of Europe." Chaitanya also influenced the Bauls. Vinoba Bhave too has commented on Chaitanya's influence in Bengal. He wrote: In childhood we used to remember five great men of Bengal: Raja Rammohan Roy, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Vivekananda, Sri Arvind and Rabindranath Tagore. During Bhoodan Yatra, when we went to Bengal, we saw that the villagers were not aware of these five great men in the Bengal villages, which we visited. Only one name was current in those villages and that was of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. And the recitation 'Hari bol, Hari bol' was heard all over. And this incident came as an immense surprise to Vinoba. To Vinoba, Chaitanya was not an ordinary man. No other name came close to Chaitanya in Bengal. In its history what place he occupies, no one else has.

Chaitanya had an all India outlook. His followers came from a few parts of India. With the help of these followers he created Vrindavan—a place some thousand kilometers away from his home. This is something unique.

## BIODATA

Name: Vishvambhar

Birth Place: Mayapur, a village in the Nadia District of Bengal—Navdwip

Birth date: February 18, 1486

Mother's Name: Sachidevi

Father's Name: Jagannath Mishra

Teacher's Name: Gadadhar Pandit or Gangadas Pandit

Works: Nil (see the text below)

Death Place: Puri, Orissa

Death Date: Sometime in 1533

## LIFE

Chaitanya was born on a full moon night when a lunar eclipse took place. His maternal grand father, Pandit Nilambar Chakravarti, was a renowned astrologer and he made the usual horoscope. He predicted that the child would be a great learned man. The parents were pleased to hear this prophecy. The child was named according to the rules of astrology and this name we have already noted under bio-data. However, this name was rarely used. On the other hand the child gathered several other names. His mother called him Nimai because he was born underneath a Neem tree. At the age of 9 when he went through the thread ceremony, he was named Gaurhari or Gaurang. At the age of 24, when Keshav Bharti

administered the oath of Sanyas (monkhood), he named him Srikrishna Chaitanya Bharti. And, the name Chaitanya stuck to him.

At the age of 5, he was sent to a school but the learning did not interest him much. He spent most of his time in mischief. His pranks were many and his victims enjoyed them much and loved the child. He did not spare even his mother. We would like to skip this narration here. At the age of 9, his father arranged for his sacred thread ceremony. He was made to recite the usual Gayatri Mantra. After the ceremony, Nimai asked his father: "What next?" He was dressed as a sanyasi and was taught to go to various houses and say 'bhavti bhixam dehi' (give me food). Nimai enjoyed this prank.

Now Nimai was sent to a school (tol) of Gadadhar pandit in a place called Ganganagar, which was close to Mayapur. He began to study seriously but the parents did not appreciate this change. In stead of being happy they began to worry. They remembered the case of Nimai's elder brother, Vishvarup, who was ten or eleven years older than him. The parents educated Vishvarup with much care and he became a real scholar but left home and became a sanyasi. His where about was not known to them. The father asked Nimai not to go to school henceforth. Nimai obeyed the father.

Nimai reverted back to his early lifestyle. His many pranks disturbed his father. The father told the son: "You are a grown up boy and you should behave properly." The son said: "You do not allow me to study, then, what else may I do?" The father relented and allowed him to go to school again. But a tragedy overtook Nimai soon. At the age of 11, his father died. He was now the only hope for his mother Sachidevi. He began his studies in right earnest. He completed all his studies in five years. He learnt from Gadadhar Pandit Sanskrit, its grammar, poetics and many other scriptural cum philosophical works. An incident during his student days was unusual. Nimai had a very brilliant teacher, Raghunath Siromani, who was writing then today's world renowned book on philosophy (nyaya) 'Didhiti'. Nimai too was writing his book 'Advaitaprakash'. Raghunath happened to read Nimai's book and he began to weep. Nimai asked Raghunath: "What's the matter?" Raghunath said: "I had thought that my book would become the best but that hope is now dashed into dust. Who would value my book in the presence of your work?" Hearing this lament, Nimai went to the Ganges and threw his book in the river. Seeing this sacrifice, Raghunath said: "Nimai, you only could do such a thing. I am greedy of fame. Your sacrifice would be valued more than my book in the world." This incident showed Nimai's magnanimity.

Since Nimai had completed his studies at the age of 14 or 15, Sachidevi, the mother, was anxious to arrange her son's marriage so that she might not lose the second son. Soon an offer came from Vallabh Acharya for his daughter's marriage to Nimai's mother. Sachidevi accepted Vallabh's proposal and Nimai was married to Laxmidevi.

Now it was time for Nimai to undertake the family responsibility. At the age of 16, he opened his own school. He proved to be a great teacher. His reputation spread far and wide. He came to be regarded as one of the great Pandits in the country. And students flocked to him. Once a renowned scholar, Keshav Kashmiri, came to Navdwip and challenged the Pandits who were residing there. Nimai easily scored over Keshav Kashmiri. This enhanced his standing among the Pandits.

To run his school Nimai needed money. He, with his students, went to the eastern part of Bengal along the banks of Padma. He was received well wherever he went. He impressed all with his learning and nobility. And, he collected good amount of money for his school. During his travels he also preached the Vaishnav doctrine to friends at some intervals. Tapan Misra, who saw divinity in him, came to Nimai. He wanted to become a Vaishnav and asked Nimai to initiate him in the fold. Nimai initiated him in the Vaishnav fold and asked him to go to Benares and live there. When he returned home he found his mother mourning. During his absence, his wife Laxmi had died because of snake-bite. He accepted his fate quietly and consoled his mother with kind words.

His mother, once again, was anxious to get her son married less he might run away. To please his mother, he married Visnupriya, the daughter of Pandit Sanatana Mishra. Soon after his marriage, Nimai went with his uncle (Masa, mother's sister's husband) Chandrasekhar and students to Gaya to perform some ritual (shradha) in connection with his father's death. There, he went to a Vishnu temple and got engrossed in the temple idol so

much that he almost lost his consciousness. Ishwar Puri, who recognized him, caught him at the nick of time before his falling. Ishwar Puri had seen Nimai in the house of his classmate Advaitacharya when he showed Nimai his book 'Shri-Krishna-Lilamrut'. Soon Nimai gained his consciousness and recognized Ishwar Puri. Both greeted each other warmly. Here, at the age of 16 or 17, Nimai took his spiritual initiation (mantra dixa) from Ishwar Puri, who was a 'sanyasi' and a disciple of the famous Madhavendra Puri. Ishwar Puri said the mantra 'Gopijana-Vallabhai-Namaha' (salutation to Krishna) in Nimai's ear. And, the initiation was over.

From Gaya, the group returned to Navdwip. Nimai resumed his school work. But now he was a completely changed man. He introduced in his school new religious subjects along with logic and grammar. His emphasis on religious subjects made his students leave him gradually. Finally, he closed down the school altogether and devoted himself to dancing and singing devotional songs. A Vaishnav, Srinivasa Pandit, invited Nimai to his home to join in singing kirtans (devotional songs) with his other invitees. These included Murarigupt, Mukund Dutt, Vasudev Ghosh and others. Among these devotees, he sang and danced with such fervor that he became an inspired man who showed heavenly spirit. Srinivas' home actually became a nocturnal school for kirtan singing. This way he created an atmosphere for Bhakti all over Navdwip. People began to recite Hari Bol, Hari Bol (say Hari) everywhere, even in the streets.

Nimai's fame as a spiritual saint spread in many parts of Bengal. Many came to him to become his followers. Among the prominent ones were elderly Advaitacharya, Gadadhar Pandit, Govind and Damodar Pandit. A Muslim, who considered Nimai as a divine personage, too came to him and became a Vaishnav and his follower. His co-religionists persecuted him but he did not relent and remained a Vaishnav. He came to be known as Haridas. He rescued a prostitute from her evil ways and she became a Vaishnav devotee. She came to be known as Haridasi. Another person called Nityanand, whom Nimai called my elder brother, also joined him. He was a wandering ascetic and a learned man. He met Nimai in his friend's home. He liked Nimai so much that he decided to dedicate his life for Nimai's cause. He began to live in Srinivas' home. Now Nimai had an inspired band of devotees who were ready to undertake any work Nimai proposed. He chose Nityanand and Haridas to take the message of Hari Bol to every nook and corner of Bengal. And, they did their task diligently.

During their wanderings, they met two ruffians called Jagai and Maghai. Maghai hurt Nityanand with a pebble, which Jagai did not approve. Nimai met Jagai and made both the ruffian brothers his followers. Now they too began to live in Srinivas' home. Later, Maghai built a hut on the bank of Ganges and lived like a saint.

Some prominent residents of Navdwip could not tolerate Nimai's progress. They became jealous and complained to Kazi Chandkhan. The Kazi misbehaved but Nimai won over him by his loving manners. Anyway, the jealousy of these men deeply hurt Nimai. He decided to renounce the earthly life and leave Navdwip. He decided to become a sanyasi and leave home. A day came for him to break his promise to his mother. He had a hard time to overcome the dissent of his mother and his wife. We would like to skip the details and note that he won over his mother and wife with deep love.

Nimai left his home and went on a bank of the river Ganges. He crossed the river and reached the opposite bank of the river. A village, called Katwa, was situated on this bank and there lived a sanyasi Keshav Bharti. Nimai wanted Bhartiji to give him the sanyas-dixa (admission in the sanyasi fold). Hence, he walked over to Bhartiji's home. Here, at the age of 24, he went through the rituals of becoming a sanyasi under the guidance of Keshav Bharti. After the ceremony, Keshav Bharti gave him a new name—SriKrishna Chaitanya Bharti—and the Sanyasi-fraternity accepted him as a sanyasi. Bhartiji wanted Chaitanya to live with him for a while but his disciple was in a hurry to go to Vrindavan. This made Bhartiji and a group of devotees—Chandrasekhar Acharya, Nityanand, Gadadhar and Mukund—to accompany him. After a day or two Chaitanya requested the elderly Bhartiji and Chandrasekhar to return home and they reluctantly agreed with sorrow. Bhartiji went back to his Ashram and Chandrasekhar went to Navdwip. The younger ones were determined to accompany him and they did. Chaitanya and the group went further for a few days but then Chaitanya changed his mind. He remembered the elderly Advaitacharya of Shantipur and he decided to go to Shantipur. He told Nityanand: "Go to Navdwip and tell my mother and others that I am going

to Shantipur and will meet them there.” Nityanand hurriedly left for Navdwip to deliver the message to Sachidevi and others.

Chaitanya reached Shantipur and lived with Advaitacharya. There he met the people of Navdwip and his sorrowing mother. Here, he consoled his mother and requested her to let him go to Vrindavan. It was hard for the aged mother to lose the sight of her son. She requested her son to live in the nearby Jagannath Puri and not in Vrindavan because she could know about him easily. To please his mother, Chaitanya agreed to her suggestion and lived there for the rest of his life.

Chaitanya lived with his mother and Advaitacharya in Shantipur for a few days. His loving nature pleased his mother and the rest of the residents. Now it was time for him to leave for Puri. He went along the bank of the river Ganges as far as Chatrabhog (Thana Mathurapura, Daimond Harbor, 24 Parganas). There he took a boat to reach Prayag-Ghat in the Midnapur District. Now he walked to Puri via Balasore and Cuttack. On the way he saw the famous temple of Bhuvneshvara. On reaching Puri, he went straight to the temple of Jagannath and got lost in contemplation. Here, the greatest scholar of Orrisa, Vasudev Sarvabhaum saw Chaitanya and his beautiful countenance and he took him to his home. He did not know Chaitanya but they both came from the same region—Vasudev was born in Vidyanagar, Nadia District and had left the place before the birth of Chaitanya. At his home, Vasudev's brother-in-law, Gopinath Misra, recognized Chaitanya and introduced him to the host. As days passed on Vasudev was learning more and more about Chaitanya. Finally, this greatest scholar of his time became Chaitanya's follower and a wave of storm took over Orrisa. Chaitanya came to be known all over Orrisa and many became his followers. Now Chaitanya thought of going on a pilgrimage to South India.

### **PILGRIMAGE TO SOUTH INDIA**

Chaitanya set out on a pilgrimage to South India taking with him only one companion named Krishnadas. He went on dancing and singing kirtans on the way. This way, they reached Kurmachal (Kurma-Ksetra or Kurma-Tirth)—a place associated with the great philosopher Ramanuja. Here, a poor Brahmin took them to his home and they stayed with him for a few days. He helped a leper in this place. Further they went on until they reached the bank of the river Godawari where a place called Vidyanagar was situated. Here, he met the Governor Ramanand Rai and had a long philosophical discussion with him. The Governor was duly impressed and warmly admired Chaitanya. They parted as friends and Chaitanya and Krishnadas continued their journey. On the way, they visited Gautamganga, Mallikarjun, Ahobal, Nrusinh, Siddhpat, Skandh-Ksetra, Tripath ... Shivkanchi, Vishnukanchi and many other places until they reached Shri-Rang Ksetra. Here they stayed for four Monsoon months. The host was one Venkata Bhat. He and his family were so much impressed by Chaitanya that they became Chaitanya's followers. Specifically, the ten year old son of Bhat, named Gopal, dedicated his life to his divine guest. When the Monsoon was over they continued their pilgrimage until they reached the ocean. From this place they returned to Puri via Pandharpur in Maharashtra. It took about three years to complete this pilgrimage and he was now 27 year old. In Puri, he received hero's welcome and the King Prataprudra too joined in it.

### **PILGRIMAGE TO BENGAL**

Chaitanya stayed for a while in Puri and again thought of going on a pilgrimage. This time he thought of going to his home country Bengal because he had promised two penitent brothers who had become Muslims that he would visit them soon. At the age of 28, he left for Bengal and reached up to Gauda. Here, he met the two penitent brothers and consoled them. He took them as his followers and asked them to go to Vrindavan. The brothers reverted back to names Rupa and Sanatana. On his return journey he visited again Advaitacharya's home in Shantipur and stayed with him. Here, he met again his beloved mother and fulfilled his promise and her most desired wish. He returned to Puri.

### **PILGRIMAGE TO VRINDAVAN**

In Puri, once again Chaitanya became restless and desired to go to his dearest place Vrindavan where he wanted to go when he had visited Gaya. This time he planned well and set out with one companion Balbhadra Bhattacharya. His route is not known to me but he visited Vrindavan and on his return journey he came down to Prayag. On the way he took

many Muslims in his Vaishnav fold and these are known to this day as Pathan Vaishnavs. In Allahabad, he met Rupa and instructed him in spirituality for ten days and then asked him to go to Vrindavan. Rupa left for Vrindavan and Chaitanya and his companion journeyed to Kashi. In Benares, they lived with Chandrasekhar and took meals in the house of Tapan Misra—his first follower whom he had asked to go to Benares and live there. Here Sanatana met Chaitanya and the latter gave him instruction in all matters for two long months and asked him to go to Vrindavan and join Rupa. In Benares, Chaitanya had a long debate with the learned Prakasanand Sarasvati and his associates. He won over them and they gave up their sectarian feelings and became admirers of Chaitanya. This made Chaitanya known all over Benares. From Benares Chaitanya and his companion returned to Puri. This journey almost took three years and he was now 31 year old.

### **HIS LAST YEARS IN PURI**

Chaitanya lived in Kasi Misra's house in Puri from 1517 to 1533. During these 16 years or so his life was full of piety and love. Two associates, Svarup Damodar and Ramanand Rai looked after him. Svarup was known as Purusottamacharya when Nimai lived in Navdwip and came now in Puri from Benares to join him. Paramanand Puri too helped him in some matters. Otherwise he sang and danced and got lost in his ecstasy. He disappeared in his 48<sup>th</sup> year during the samkirtan in the temple of Tota-Gopinath. It is said that he ran out of temple and embraced the blue waves of Bay of Bengal thinking them as God Krishna.

### **CHAITANYA'S FOLLOWERS IN VRINDAVAN**

We came across Chaitanya's followers in Bengal while reading the above biography. We now read about his followers in Vrindavan. He created Vrindavan with the help of these followers and many other Vaishnavs built their temples there later. To this day, Vrindavan is one of the greatest centers for the followers of God Krishna. The other one is Mathura. These followers of Chaitanya were known as Goswamis. The prominent among them numbered six: Rup Goswami, Sanatana Goswami, Gopal Bhat Goswami, Raghunath Bhat Goswami, Raghunath Das Goswami and Jiv Goswami. Among these six, four were renowned and we look at them cursorily. Rup and Sanatana were brothers from South India and were well versed in Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. They found employment with Hussain Shah, the then Emperor of Gaud, who named them Dabir Khas (or is it Khan?) and Sakara Mallik respectively. These brothers did not like their Muslim identity and wanted to become Vaishnav. They wrote to Chaitanya in Puri about their predicaments. Chaitanya wrote them a consolatory letter and promised them that he would visit Gaud soon. The rest of the story as narrated above we know and we would not repeat it here. Gopal was from Sri-Rang Tirth, where Chaitanya lived with him during his South India pilgrimage. He was then a boy. When he grew up, Chaitanya asked him to live in Vrindavan and assist Rup and Sanatana in their works. Gopal was a learned man. He had studied rhetoric, poetry, Vedanta, and Sanskrit grammar from his uncle Probodhanand Saravati. Chaitanya was so much pleased with his dedication that he had sent his personal belongings as a gift to him. Jiv was a nephew of Rup and Sanatana. He received a thorough training under the supervision of his uncles.

Chaitanya himself did not leave any works behind him. He had dictated eight verses of instruction, which one of his followers took down. These eight verses came to be known as 'Siksa-Satak'. And, it is considered as Chaitanya's philosophy in the condensed form. It is these six Goswamis who systematized the Gaudiya Vaishnav Theology. They wrote most of the works. For instance, Gopal assisted Sanatana in compiling the book Hari Bhakti Vilas. Jiv wrote his famous work Sat-Sandarbh. He also trained Narottama Das Thakur, Srinivas Acharya and Syamanand Pandit who became the pillars of the second generation of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

### **VINOBA'S COMMENT ON CHAITANYA**

Vinoba has quoted one of the slokas of Chaitanya, which runs as under: trunadpi sunichen tarokhi sahisnuna, amanina manden kirtaniyah sada harih (Bhakta is one, who is always singing kirtan and he is so polite that he understands himself lower than a leaf and tolerant like a tree.). Then, he goes on to explain this verse: the words amanina manden come from the work Vishnu-Sahastra-Nam. It means that we should disregard praise or insult but we should always respect others. In his opinion, this is the message of Chaitanya

Mahaprabhu for all of his followers. In this one verse is contained Chaitanya's whole viewpoint.

Vinoba noted that Chaitanya had gone right up to Pandharpur. This is true as we have noted earlier. Chaitanya had specific reason to visit Pandharpur. He had heard from the people of Navdwip that his elder brother, Vishvarup, had died in Pandharpur. A famous poet-devotee, Vasudev Ghosh, who was living then in Pandharpur, had brought this news to Navdwip. Vinoba also talks of Tukaram's dream in which Chaitanya appeared and gave him the Mantra 'Ram Krishna Hari'. Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother, Satyendranath, too had noted this fact and had collected Tukaram's verses in a volume. In short, Chaitanya's name was familiar in Maharashtra and 'Bol Hari, Bol Hari, Hari Hari Bol, Mukund, Madhav, Govind Bol' was also heard there. 'Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Ram Ram Hare Hare, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, a Chaitanya's Mantra, too was heard there.

## **CHAITANYA'S PHILOSOPHY**

I do not attempt to summarize Chaitanya's philosophy because he wrote nothing about it. In reality he was a great spiritual teacher as he was a great teacher in his own school during his early period. He taught by his personal example and not from books. His life itself illumined his philosophy brilliantly. In Vinoba's words, Chaitanya distributed Love among all kinds of people to such an extent that he was regarded as a personification of Sri Krishna in Bengal. He expected from his followers the purest character and learning, firm ethical principles and spiritual love of Radha-Krishna.

## **LEGENDS**

There are so many legendary incidents in Chaitanya's life that it would require a small booklet to record them all. It is obvious that it cannot be accommodated in this small biography. I record a few incidents, which took place before his 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> year.

- It is said that a Brahmin was a guest in his house. He cooked some food to offer it to his idol of Krishna. Nimai ate it and made the food useless for offering. The Brahmin cooked the food again and Nimai spoiled the food again as he ate it. Nimai was tied then and the Brahmin cooked the food a third time. When the Brahmin offered the food before his idol, Nimai appeared in the place of idol as Krishna and took the offering.
- It is said that two thieves kidnapped Nimai to steal his ornaments. Nimai with his spiritual power made them to leave him at his home unharmed and they lived thereafter as decent men.
- All such incidents are fully recorded in his biographies and these are listed below.

## **BIOGRAPHIES OF CHAITANYA**

Chaitanya Bhagvata in Bengali by Vrindavan Das Thakur

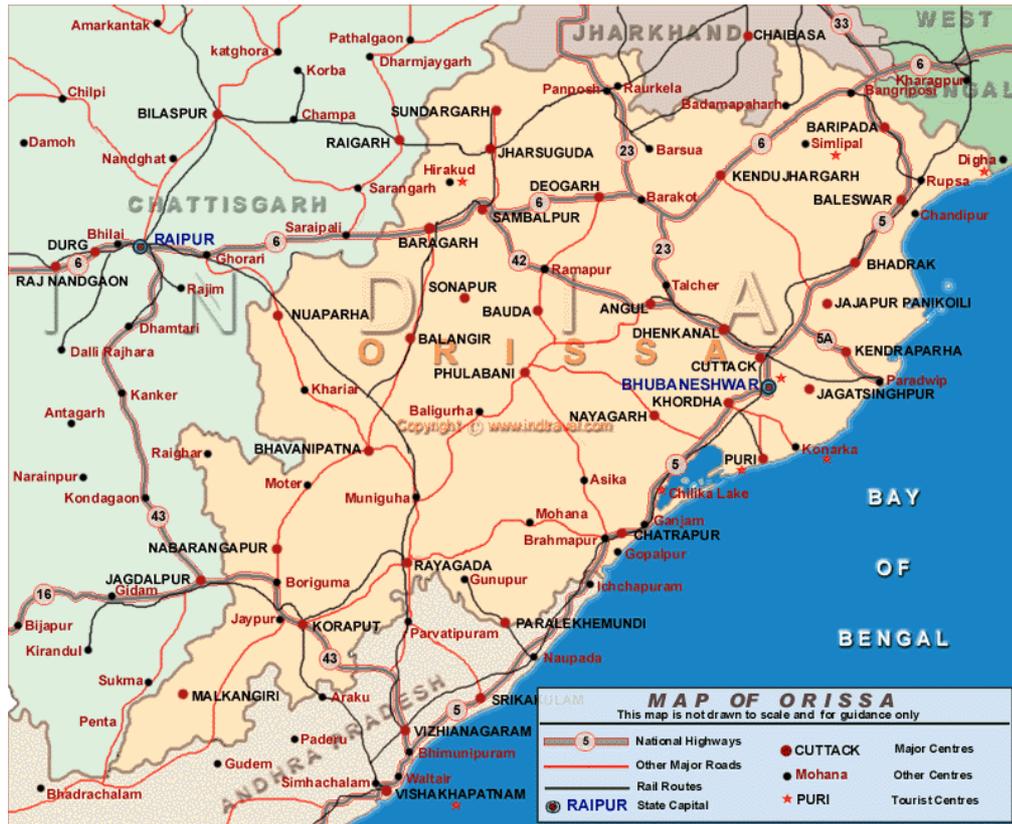
Chaitanya Charitamrit in Bengali by Krishnadas Kaviraj

Chaitanya: His Pilgrimage and Teachings (from his contemporary Bengali biography the Chaitanya Charitamrit: Madhyalila) tr. into English by Jadunath Sarkar. Calcutta, 1913

Chaitanya Mangala in Bengali by Lochan Das Thakur

In my narration of the above biography I have mainly relied on a short note of Srila Bhaktivinod Thakur. This is given as a Prologue in 1974 edition of the book 'Teachings of Lord Chaitanya' by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, pages xiii-xxii.

## CHAPTER 3



Area: 155707 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: (H: 94.35% / M: 2.07% / C: 2.43%) / Source: 2001 Census.

### JAGANNATH DAS (1490-1550)

Jagannath Das was a great saint of Orissa. He was a Sanskrit scholar and his Bhagwat is the gem of the Oriya literature. Even today, his Bhagwat is read practically in every home. Moreover, it is worthy to note that what Shankardev and Madhavdev did for the overall development of Assam, Jagannath Das did the same for Orissa. In every village of Assam, there is a Namghar where Madhavdev's Namghosha is recited. Likewise, in Orissa, in every village, there is a Bhagwat Tungi where Jagannath's Bhagwat is read. These places are the life of the people residing in these states. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Jagannath Das were contemporaries. Once, Chaitanya happened to hear Jagannath reciting his Bhagwat. The recitation moved Chaitanya so much that after its completion Chaitanya embraced Jagannath and said: "You are extremely great (tumi ati bad)." From that day, the people of Orissa called him atibad Jagannath. His followers came to be called 'atibadi'. This is enough to show in what esteem Jagannath was and is held in his countryside.

### BIODATA

Name: Jagannath

Birth Place: Kapileshwarpuri—a village 10 km from Jagannath Puri

Birth date: sometime in 1490

Mother's name: Padmavati

Father's name: Bhagwandas

School: He was educated at home

Works: The Sanskrit books: Krishna-bhakti-kalpalata-mala, Nitya-gupta-mala, Upasana-shatak, Prem-sudhambudhi, Nityachar-dixopasna-vidhi, Sri Radha-rasmanjari, Niladri-shatak and Jagannath Charitambudhi-sarani. The Udia books: Srimad bhagwat (magnum opus), Sholo-chaupothi; Shaivagam bhagwat, Satsang varnan, Gunduchvijaya, Gaulok sarodwar, Sri Radhakrishna mahamantra chandrika, Adbhut chandrika, Niladri chandrika, and Raskalpa chandrika

Death Place: Jagannath Puri  
Death date: sometime in 1550

## LIFE

Jagannath's parents were ardent devotees of Lord Jagannath of Puri. For this reason, they named their son Jagannath. The son too became an ardent devotee of the same God and remained brahmachari (celibate) throughout his life. Puri, being near to their home, as a matter of routine, the parents went to the temple of Jagannath daily. Bhagwandas, the father, was well versed in the recitation of various Puranas. He was known as 'puran-panda' in his village. His profession was to visit the home of a devotee who invited him to recite Bhagwat during some auspicious occasions. The boy, Jagannath, accompanied the father during visits and mastered the various Purans in due course of time. The Puranas being in Sanskrit, he mastered the Sanskrit language also. The father was always there to help him in his studies. By the age of 16, Jagannath had completed his studies in Veda, Vedanta, and the renowned six philosophies of his times. He was now well prepared to assist his father in his profession.

Later, in his life, he wrote some eighteen books, eight in Sanskrit and ten in the Udia language. Among these, his Bhagwat is famous. On its completion, he had dedicated his book to Lord Jagannath. For this purpose, he recited his Bhagwat in the courtyard of the Puri temple. Many devotees of the Lord Jagannath came to hear him and his recitation pleased them. His fame reached the king Pursottamdev of Puri and the king invited him to recite the Udia Bhagwat in the palace. The king was extremely pleased with the sweet and sonorous rendering of the Udia Bhagwat and he decided to reward the saint. The king built a beautiful Ashram on the seashore of Puri. This Ashram came to be known later as 'Sat Lahar Math'. In this monastery, Jagannath recited his Bhagwat everyday and people flocked there to hear him. He was now known all over the country and he had to go from place to place to recite his Bhagwat.

When the king Pursottamdev died, his son, Prataprudradev, came to the throne. Some priests who did not like Jagannath's success lodged a complaint against him. They told the new king that Jagannath was a fraud. Prataprudradev asked his men to fetch Jagannath in the court. Jagannath arrived in the court and the king told him about the priests' complaint against him. Jagannath said: "I go to any person who invites me and recite Bhagwat in his or her home. I am a man before men and a woman before women. My behavior with everyone is straightforward." The king was not satisfied with the answer and he jailed him. The saint lived there peacefully.

Prataprudradev was an ardent devotee of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The king wanted him to initiate his wife, the queen, in the Bhagwat Dharma. Chaitanya told the king that the right person to initiate the queen in the Bhagwat Dharma was Jagannath Das. He told him that Jagannath Das was a true saint and what he said in the court was true. The king had before him two choices: one was to ignore his Guru's advice or to act according to his Guru's wishes. The king freed Jagannath Das and invited him to the palace. The king said to Das: "If you have pardoned me, then please recite the Bhagwat for me." Das recited the Udia Bhagwat in the palace and initiated the queen in the Bhagwat Dharma. This way, Jagannath Das was exonerated.

Like his father, Prataprudradev rewarded Jagannath Das with a monastery called 'Udiamath' on the western side of Puri at Chandrark. Jagannath lived a simple life of a monk. He spent his time in his monasteries or outside of it in reciting his Bhagwat or writing his books. He died in the year 1550, at the age of 60, in one of his monasteries. His mausoleum exists on the seashore of Puri next to one of Haridas Thakur.

## LEGENDS

- God asked Jagannath Das in his dream to write the Udia Bhagwat.
- Once, Jagannath was disturbed in his monastery by the roaring sea. He ordered the sea to move seven furlongs away and the sea obeyed. For this reason, his monastery is called 'Seven Lahar Math'.
- God gave Jagannath the ability to become a man or a woman whenever he desired so. This way, Jagannath proved his claim before the king.

- Once, Prataprudradev sent some puja (offering) material to Lord Jagannath. The latter did not do as directed by the former. The king asked for the explanation from Jagannath. The saint said: "You go to the temple and verify whether your material has reached the idol." The king did and he was stunned to see that his material had reached the idol. The king was convinced that Jagannath was a true saint.

#### **VINOBA'S COMMENTS ON UDIA BHAGWAT**

When Vinoba visited Orissa, he found that the reputation of the Bhagwat Dharma was everywhere in the state. In his opinion, Jagannath's Bhagwat is the best work in the Udia language. He considered it the gem of Udia language and there was a time when it was read in every house and in every village. Further, he said: In Vedic period animal slaughter (Yajna) took place. The Bhagwat Dharma disapproved it and stopped it. This story is found in Jagannath's Bhagwat and Vinoba was pleased to see it.

In writing this biography, I have relied on stray articles in magazines. For this reason, I am afraid that it might not be very authentic.

## CHAPTER 4



Area: 94164 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 82,998,509 (H: % / M: 16.5%) / Source: 2001 Census.

### VIDYAPATI (1352/60-1448)

Vidyapati was the greatest poet of the Maithili language. He was also a devotee of God Shiva. Hence he is considered the poet-saint of Bihar. He wrote lyrics on Radha-Krishna in Maithili in the same tradition as that of Jaidev in Sanskrit. He, being a Shivite, also wrote devotional songs in praise of Shiva. He was actually a great scholar of Sanskrit and majority of his works were written in that language. However, he is famous today for his songs and poems known as 'Padavali Poems' in Maithili. His Padavali has such lyrical and artistic beauty that it inspired Rabindranath Tagore. Also, Aurobindo translated a number of poems in English. It is said that he started a new literary style, which influenced even the styles in Bengali and Assamese languages. In this sense his contribution is far and wide. Even today, he is popular both in Bihar and Bengal. And, people recite his poems and sing his songs.

### BIODATA

Name: Vidyapati

Birth Place: Bishphi, a village in the Madhubani district of Bihar

Birth date: around 1360

Mother's name: Not known to me

Father's name: Ganapati

School: Perhaps he had no need to go to a school. He came from a highly learned family

Works: Kirti-pataka (historical romance), Go-raksha-vijay (drama in Maithili), Purush Pariksha (collection of stories), Bhu-parikrama (geography), Likhnabali (about writing), Bibhasagar (autobiographical) and Dhan-bakyabali (about charity). In all he wrote 18 works in Sanskrit and Maithili along with many songs and ballads. He covered poetry, geography, history, ethics and law. He fulfilled his name Vidyapati.

Death Place: Vidyapati Math, Bajitpur, in the Darbhanga district of Bihar

Death date: some time in 1448

## **LIFE**

Vidyapati was born in a family whose members were highly learned men. His ancestors were great scholars. He simply followed in their footsteps. He was a court poet of the Maithili Kings who ruled then. Their patronage allowed him a peaceful life. His genius flowered then into grand literary and creative works. He was a master of the Sanskrit language and Maithili was his mother tongue. He was respected among the scholars for his Sanskrit learning and his Maithili songs were popular among the masses. I do not know the details of his life.

## **LEGEND**

He was such a great devotee of Shiva that God himself came to live in his house as his servant. Shiva took the name Uzna and made the condition that his identity should not be disclosed. Vidyapati's wife ill-treated Uzna. Vidyapati scolded his wife and told who Uzna was. He inadvertently disclosed the identity. Uzna disappeared. In some parts of Bihar Shiva is worshipped as Uzna even today.

I tried to get the details of Vidyapati's life but I could not get an authentic biography. Whatever I have written here is from my notes.

## CHAPTER 5



**Area: 238566 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 166,197,921 (H: % / M: 18.5%) / Source: 2001 Census.**

### RAMANAND (1300-1411)

Ramanand was the founder of the Bhakti Movement in North India. Many eminent scholars have acknowledged this fact. In Dr. Grierson's words his movement spread in every nook and corner of this vast land like a flash of lightning. It gave a new life to the people during their dire circumstances. Dr. Hazariprasad Dwivedi said that the Bhakti Movement took care of these circumstances and transmitted to Hindus a hopeful vision, which was new and generous. Among the followers of Kabir, there is a saying: "Bhakti dravid upaji, layo Ramanand." That is, Bhakti began in the Dravid land and Ramanand brought it to the North. Ramanand was the follower of the Ramanuja Vaishnav fold and he was in the line of Ramanuja's followers Harshnand and Raghvanand. His main contribution was that the Haribhakti (devotion to God) was open to all—rich or poor; high caste or low caste. And this assurance attracted many people from all walks of life to his Bhakti Movement. Among hundreds of his followers, the following twelve were prominent: Anantanand, Kabir (a weaver), Sukhanand, Sursuranand, Padmavati (a woman), Narharyanand, Pipa (a king of Gangrongadh), Bhavanand, Ravidas (a tanner or currier), Dhanna (a Jat), Sen Nai (a barbar) and Sursuri. Among these 12, Ravidas and Kabir were very popular among people. Ramanand's one hymn in Rag Basant is given a place in Guru Granth Sahib of Sikhs.

From the above narration we see that Ramanand was a great saint of India. His main contribution was the Haribhakti of Ram in the Northern part of India. Yet, when I attempt to write his biography here, I have no authentic material on him to rely upon. One biographer tells me that he was a Tamilian. Another tells me that he was from Andhra Pradesh. They both agree that he went on a pilgrimage from South to North. A third one tells me that he was born in Allahabad and had South Indian parentage. He went on a pilgrimage from North to South. As for his birth date, we have three: 1300, 1366 and 1400. As for his death date, we have two: 1411 and 1480. The problem before me is how to reconcile with this diverse information. I have simply relied on my judgment and I am likely to be in error.

### BIODATA

Name: Ramanand

Birth Place: Not known to me

Birth date: 1300 (traditional one)  
Mother's name: Sushila  
Father's name: Bhoor Karma  
School: Raghvanand educated him in his monastery  
Works: Sri Vaishnav Matanbuj Bhaskar and Sri Ram-arachan Padhati  
Death Place: Kashi  
Death date: 1411 (traditional one)

## LIFE

Ramanand was a wandering sadhu who preached Ram-bhakti around Varanasi. He said: "Jatiponti puchhe na koi; hariko bhaje so harika hoi". That is, let no one ask a man's caste or with whom he eats; if a man is devoted to Hari, he becomes Hari's (God's) own. He traveled all over India and gathered his disciples. These disciples in turn preached Ram-bhakti in their respective areas. He pursued his mission with a single minded devotion until his death in 1411 in Kashi.

This is all I can say about Ramanand's biography from the material I have.

## RAVIDAS (1377-1528)

Ravidas was the foremost disciple of Ramanand (1300-1411). He was the gurubhai (brother-disciple of the same teacher) of Kabir (1398-1518). Both carried forward their Guru's work much further. Both were very famous in India in their times. Both had great regard for each other. Kabir had said: "Ravidas is a saint among sadhus (holy men)." According to Dr. Hazariprasad, Kabir was once asked about Brahmajnan; he replied that I was a child and crossed the path sitting on my mother's waist: Ask Ravidas who is older and walked the path with the mother with a bag on his head. He can expound on it. This shows that Kabir always considered Ravidas as his elder Gurubhai. Many saints have paid glowing tributes to Ravidas. I quote a few but do not try to translate their words. It is beyond me. Dadu (1544-1603) said: "Ram Ram kahi rom samanna, jan Ravidas mile bhagwana." Aknath (1533-1599) said: "Rohidas chamar sub kuchh jane ..." Tukaram (1598-1658) said: "... Ravidas Kabir sage mere." Dayabai said: "Bheto jab Ravidas ku, linho bhuja pasar." This shows that his works were known to many and he was remembered long after his death. Vinoba Bhave too said that Ravidas' name is too well-known in Maharashtra and he is called Rohidas in the Marathi language. The saying in Marathi is: Chokamela is mahar; Rohidas is chamar.

The main characteristic of Ravidas was his utter humility. He said: "I am 'dasanudasa'." The translation of 'dasanudasa' as servant's servant does not convey the subtle meaning of the original word. His language was free from bitter accusation. In this respect, he was different from his Gurubhai Kabir. He was humble and had sweet disposition. He worked hard from morning to evening and whatever little he had he spent for others, which included sadhus and saints. His wife Loni supported him. All liked him. His greatest contribution during his lifetime was his conviction that all men are equal. And he preached this equality of men all over India. Today his sayings and poems are collected in Ravidas-ki-bani. His two bhajans, prabhujhi tum chandan hum pani and Narhari, chanchal he mati meri, are very popular and are sung often. The first one tells God that you are my master and I am a mere servant of yours. That is how I do your bhakti. The second one tells God: how am I to do your bhakti? Both these bhajans convey to us his profound humility.

## BIODATA

Name: Ravidas  
Birth Place: Bhandur or Mandur (ancient Mandua diha). It is a village on the Grand Trunk Road, three or four kilometers from the Benares cantonment.  
Birth date: sometime in 1377 (Sunday, Maghpujurnima)  
Mother's name: Karmadevi  
Father's name: Mandas  
School: He did not go to any school.  
Works: Ravidas-ki-bani  
Death Place: controversial: Chitod or Benares  
Death date: 1528

## **LIFE**

Ravidas was born on a day called Ravivar (Sunday) in India and his parents named him Ravidas on that count. He was born in a tanner, currier and shoe-maker family, which was respected in the village because of its members' pious disposition. Ravidas was not educated in a school but learnt his father's profession at home. From childhood he was attracted towards monks and sanyasis and he gathered scriptural knowledge from them. Whatever little money he had he spent on feeding and looking after them. As time went on, he began to pay more attention to his newly acquired knowledge but he did not neglect his daily professional work. His parents were alarmed. They thought that their son would become a sadhu (monk). To teach him his responsibility, they got him married to Lonadevi soon. His wife turned out to be helpful in her husband's pursuits. A son named Vijaydas was born in their home but this could not be endorsed with certainty. As such we know very little about his family life or he had no time to lead family life. He worked from morning to evening and whatever little he saved he spent on others. This behavior his father did not like and finally the father was compelled to ask the son to live separately from him. The father gave Ravidas a piece of land behind his house. Here, Ravidas built a small hut for him and began to live with his wife. He continued his profession to earn his livelihood and earned a little to support himself and his wife.

When Ravidas (1377-1528) met Ramanand (1300-1411) I do not know. But Ramanand was likely to be a very old man when he took Ravidas as his disciple. Kabir (1398-1518) could be the disciple of Ramanand only if he had met him around the age of 10. Whatever might be the date when Ravidas met Ramanand, one thing is certain that Ravidas might have widened his knowledge during their wanderings throughout India.

Ravidas came to be regarded as a saint because of his silent selfless generous life, full of devotion to Ram and his contentment supplemented by noble thoughts. He moved all over India and preached Ram-bhakti. His work Ravidas-ki-bani contains 50 sakhis (couplets or sayings) and 37 pads (poems or songs)—in all 87 items. There might be more Ravidas' poems or songs, which might not have found place in his above named work. Guru Granth Sahib of Sikhs contains 39 pads of Ravidas. Dadu-bani too contain Ravidas' pads.

Ravidas was against the formation of any caste or creed. Yet, his followers later came together under Ravidasiya sect. Today his followers are not in thousands but in millions and they are spread all over India. They are found mostly in Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. But they call Ravidas by variant names. In Bengal Ravidas' name is Ruidas; in Maharashtra, it is Rohidas or Rohitas; in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, it is Ravidas or Raidas and in Punjab, it is Raidas or Ravidas or Ramdas. This shows his popularity in the northern part of India even to this date.

## **RAVIDAS AND NANAKDEV**

The followers of Ravidas(1377-1528) believe that Nanakdev (1469-1539) met Ravidas in Varanasi but some scholars think that they met in Ayodhya. The meeting took place sometime in 1499 when Ravidas was 122 years old. Nanakdev wrote in his poems Ravidas' name with great faith. For instance we read the following line: Ravidas dhyaye prabhu anup, gurudev 'Nanak' Govind rup. Also, as we have noted above, Ravidas' bhajans (devotional songs) are given an honorable place in Guru Granth Sahib. They are sung today in Gurudwaras (Sikh temples) all over India.

## **RAVIDAS AND MIRABAI**

No one tells us when Ravidas went to Chitod. It is said that the queen of Chitod named Zali-Rani Ratnakunvari invited her Guru Ravidas to Chitod but this queen is not identified so far and we are unsure of Ravidas' visit to her kingdom. Mirabai (1498-1546) lived in Chitod for 18 years (1516-1534) and Ravidas (1377-1528) might have been living in Chitod then. It is possible that sometime between 1516 and 1528, Mirabai might have accepted Ravidas as her Guru. Mira's four bhajans mention Raidas as her Guru. These are: (1) Mirane Govind milyaji, guru milya Raidas. (2) Raidas sant mile mohi satguru. (3) Mirake prabhu tumhi swami, Sri Raidas satguruji. (4) Guru miliya Raidasji, dinhi jnanki gutki. But nothing I can say with conviction or full confidence because firm dates for any saint are rarely available. Gautam Bajaj, who wrote something like a preface to volume 9 of Vinoba Bhawe, gave the Raidas

period from 1414 to 1540. This period does not tally with the traditional period we have assumed so far. I leave the matter here because I cannot enlighten myself.

## LEGENDS

Ravidas was a great saint and there was no way for him to be free from legends. I will not narrate all the legends associated with his name but give only a few.

- Once a monk came to Ravidas' hut and saw him making shoes. He observed his poor condition. He decided to make him rich. He gave him a magic or touch stone. He showed him how his stone turned anything into gold by its mere touch. Ravidas refused to accept it. Then monk placed the stone somewhere in the hut and left the place. After a year or so the monk returned to the hut and found the stone where it was. Ravidas hadn't touched it. He was happy with his poor life.
- The orthodox residents of Kashi did not like a shoe-maker explaining scriptures to laymen. They lodged a complaint against Ravidas with the king Virsinghdev Vaghela of Kashi. The king invited both the parties before him to resolve the dispute. It was then decided that whoever summoned the idol lying in King's chamber before him with his spiritual power would be regarded as a true God's devotee. Ravidas did what he was asked to do with a prayer to God. Others simply failed. The King honored the saint and Ravidas' fame spread outside the boundary of Kashi.
- Once a layman taunted Ravidas in the following words: "Maharaja, you talk to us of swimming over the ocean of life. Could you make a stone to swim over the Ganges? Ravidas threw a stone with the name of Ram on it and it floated in the river. The laymen were stunned when they saw this.
- Brahmins were not willing to dine with Ravidas. They sat separately to dine but they found one Ravidas was sitting between the two Brahmins. They were helpless.

Such legends do not help us to write an authentic biography and we end here. We do not know where Ravidas died. Some believe that he died in Kashi; others believe that he died in Chitod. A mausoleum built over his foot-prints exists in Chitod and his followers go on a pilgrimage there.

In writing this biography, I have relied on Acharya Prithvisingh Azad. His biography of Guru Ravidas is published by National Book Trust, India. He belonged to the Ravidasiya community and wrote books to perpetuate the sant sahitya of his Guru. He was one of the members of the Indian Constituent Assembly and later he was the deputy Chief Minister of Punjab for sometime.

## KABIRDAS (1398-1518)

Kabir is one of the greatest poets of the Hindi literature but we know nothing about him. Gautam Bajaj, whom we referred to in an earlier chapter, wrote: Kabir's birth to his religion, everything is controversial. This is very true. It is futile to attempt to write his biography here. It is buried in the abysmal divide due to the Hindu-Muslim problem. Even if a bridge is built over the divide in future, the biography is as good as lost forever. I give here a few versions.

## BIODATA

Name: Kabir  
Birth Place: Lahartara, close to Ravidas' Mandur near Benares.  
Birth date: some time in 1398 (traditional)  
Foster mother's name: Niru  
Foster father's name: Nima  
School: He did not go to a school.  
Works: Bijak is compiled by his follower Dharamdas (1465- ?)  
Death Place: Maghar near Gorakhpur  
Death date: sometime in 1518 (traditional)

## LIFE

Today the biography of Kabir is manufactured according to the need of an ideology. I give below a biographical note prepared for the ideology "Shared Heritage, True Heritage". It

runs as follows: "Kabir (1398-1518) is a household name in India. He is a symbol of protest against orthodox Hindu and Muslim practices and caste-based injustices. A worshipper of both Ram and Allah, he blazed a way to God that transcends differences between Islam and Hinduism. He was acknowledged by Guru Nanak as one of his spiritual precursors. The holy scripture of Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib, contains over 500 verses by Kabir." Traditionally, Kabir is a follower of Ramanand who is a worshipper of Ram. How Allah comes in the picture, I do not know. Yes, one might think that he was not a disciple of Ramanand and followed an independent path. This is just a wishful biography and not a true biography.

Sudarsan Chopra, who edited some work on Kabir (1398-1494) commented: "Some say that Kabir's Guru was Ramanand but it is said that Ramanand did not accept him. No where in Kabir's work we find Ramanand's name." Chopra, on the basis of Guru Granth Sahib, infers that Pitamber Pir, a Hindu, a worshipper of Ram, was his Guru.

### **VINOBA'S COMMENTS ON KABIR**

Whenever India has progressed, it is due to her saintly men. Whatever prestige Tulsidas or Kabir has in Uttar Pradesh, no king had. Kabir was a mystic. Many poems are in his name but it cannot be said that all are his. Kabir was a brahmchari (a celibate). Fools tell that he had a son called Kamal. He was an adopted son. He had no son. Kabir means great. He did not organize any sampradaya. His followers did. Kabir reveled in disobeying tradition. He lived his life throughout in Kashi, but he went to die in Maghar because he wanted to break the traditional belief that death in Kashi was auspicious or holy. Both Kabir and Tulsidas did not cultivate contacts with any king or his kingdom.

Kabir lived up to 120. Ramanuja also lived up to 120. Kabir belonged to the Ramanuja Sampradaya. Ramanuja's follower was Ramanand. Ramanand's disciple was Kabir. Tulsidas was also in the Ramanand tradition. Kabir's famous work is called Bijak. Whatever ideas Jnaneshwar had expressed in his Amritanubhav, similar views are found in Kabir's Bijak. What are called 'nirgunia' and 'sahajia' paths, the union of these two makes that of Kabir. Vinoba says that that is his impression. Bijak is Kabir's only work. He did not know how to write; his followers must have written it. Then, Vinoba quotes Kabir's one line: Guru gud diya mitha (guru gave sweet jaggery or brown-sugar) and tells us that this idea is that of Sankracharya. The renowned philosopher had said that there are three kinds of seeing. The first knowing is: jaggery is sweet because you are told so. You haven't seen it with your eyes but heard about it with your ears. The second knowing is: Guru gave jaggery in your hand. Now you have seen it with your eyes but haven't tasted it with your tongue. The third knowing is: Now you put it in your mouth and self-realize that it is sweet. These knowing are classified as 'sastra-pratiti, guru-pratiti and atma-pratiti in Sanskrit. Kabir used it in his sakhi (saying). This is what Vinoba thought of Kabir.

### **PROBABLE LIFE OF KABIR - NOT TRUE**

Kabir's widowed Brahmin mother left her infant near a pond in Lahartara. A weaver named Nima went to the pond to wash the woven clothes. He found the child there. He took the child home and handed over to his wife Niru. The couple nursed the child and looked upon him as their son. When he grew up, they taught him their profession of weaving. This was all the education Kabir received. The names Nima and Niru do not appear to me to be Muslim but they were Muslims. And, this was Kabir's misfortune that he became a controversial figure.

When Kabir met Ramanand and became his disciple we do not know. Ramanand died when Kabir was about 13 years old. It is said that Kabir was sleeping near one of the bathing 'ghats' on the Ganges. Ramanand happened to go that way to take his early morning bath. Accidentally, Ramanand's foot-wear struck Kabir. The latter screamed. Ramanand felt very bad. He lifted Kabir and apologized and said some kind words. Since then Kabir considered Ramanand his Guru. He began to worship Ram and behaved as a Hindu monk. I do not know whether his foster parents disapproved Kabir's behavior but the Muslims and Hindus of Benares certainly took objection. Kabir earned his livelihood following his profession of weaving and practiced the religion of his heart. He might have cultivated friendly relations with the principal followers of Ramanand and broadened his vision and learning. In any case he was a free man and not dependent on any one for his livelihood. He did not care what others thought of him.

Once, Kabir and his friends took shelter in a poor girl's hut. She received them warmly and offered them milk she had. Kabir did not drink the milk, which was in his earthen cup but told the girl that one more guest would arrive soon and you keep the milk for him. This is what exactly happened and the girl became the devotee of Kabir. Her name was Loi and she began to live with Kabir. People took her as his wife. They adopted two children, Kamal and Kamali—a boy and a girl—and brought them up. These came to be known as their son and daughter. Once, their daughter gave drinking water to a man, who was thirsty and was passing by a well, from which Kamali was drawing water. When the man came to know that the girl was a Muslim he went to the father to complain about the daughter. The man said that he was a Brahmin and your daughter ought to know that she should not offer water to a Brahmin. We need not go into the long debate that took place between the man, Harpal, and Kabir. Finally, Harpal admitted his mistake and he became the devotee of Kabir and married his daughter. It is from this daughter's side that Kabir's followers thought that his descendent line continued. Kabir lived during the time when Sikandar Lodi ruled in Delhi. It is said that Lodi tortured Kabir. The latter was thrown in a river and an elephant was let loose on him. Kabir's Ram stood by him and he was saved. Kabir continued to live his usual weaver's life in Benares and when he became old he went to Maghar to die. He died in Maghar at the age of 120. His Hindu followers built a kind of memorial there. His Muslims followers too have built a separate memorial there. These exist even today in Maghar.

## **LEGENDS**

Once, some Vaishnavs did not want to dine with the weaver Kabir. They made a condition that only those who could recite scriptures correctly should dine together. Kabir realized the folly. He brought a buffalo and made the animal to recite the scriptures correctly with his spiritual power. Then he asked the Vaishnavs to dine with the animal. They were humiliated and humbled.

It is difficult to write anything on Kabir. Someone has written his earliest birth date as 1149 when Ramanand and Ravidas were not born. That is absurd. Whatever I have written here is plausible. I do not claim any authenticity.

## **SURDAS (1478/79-1583)**

Indian scholars have identified three poets with the name Surdas in the Hindi literature. These are: Bilvamangal Surdas, Surdas Madan Mohan and saint-poet Surdas. We are concerned here with Surdas the saint, who lived in Vrindavan.

Surdas is a great name in the Hindi literature. He is considered as the greatest poet of Vraja Bhasha—a dialect of Hindi. He was not only a great poet but also a great musician and a composer. It is difficult for critics to decide whether he was greater as a poet or as a musician. Vinoba Bhave has called him Hindi Mahasagar (Indian Ocean) of the Hindi literature. Jaidev Singh Thakur, a musicologist and a Hindi scholar said: "He was decidedly one of the greatest poets of all time. In simile, in metaphor, imagery, poetic fancy, delicacy of sentiments, he has few equals. In child poetry, describing the child life of Krishna, he is unrivaled." This meritorious poet never married, made a living by singing bhajans, and passed his mature life in Vraj.

## **BIODATA**

Name: Surdas

Birth Place: Sihi, a village 13 km from Delhi and 3 km from Vallabhghadh

Birth date: some time in 1478

Mother's name: not known to me

Father's name: not known to me

School: He did not go to any school

Works: Sursagar (magnum opus), Surramayan, Sursaravali, Bhanvargit and Sahityalahari. It is said that all of his works are contained in 23 books of which some are still (1995) unpublished.

Death Place: Parasoli in Vraj

Death date: some time in 1583

## LIFE

Surdas' childhood was simply miserable. His father was very poor and his mother's life was hard. We do not know when and how Surdas became blind. Some say he was blind from the birth but this does not explain his leaving home during his boyhood. Perhaps he was semi-blind from the birth and might have become totally blind gradually. Whatever might be the fact, one thing is certain that Surdas did not receive warmth that such a child needed. He was taken as a burden on the family. The poor father saw no hope for the future of his son and his frustrations led him to treat his son harshly. It was difficult for the child to bear his father's harsh words everyday and a day came when he left his home for good.

When and how Surdas left his home is told in several versions and it is difficult for me to select one from the other. It is said that one day he saw a group of pilgrims singing bhajans and going towards Mathura. He joined them and ran away from home. In another version, the father received some gold mohur (a kind of gold coinage) from a kind person. He kept it securely but rats shifted it from the secured place and it got misplaced. When father could not locate it, he wept and said very harsh words to his son. The son, even being blind, searched and located its where about. He told the father the location and ran away to the neighboring village and sat under a Pipal tree near a pond. The father located his wealth and went after his son but the son refused to return. The third version is the same as the above one but with some variation. In this version, the son made a condition that he would show the location only if the father allowed him to leave home for good. The father agreed and Surdas left his home. I have given all the three versions to show the harsh condition in which the family lived even when the end is the same—Surdas leaving the home. This explains why we do not know the parents' names and what name they gave to their son. Surdas is the name given by the people because he was a very good singer.

We do not know how a blind boy of 8 or 10 managed to live alone under a tree. It is likely that some kind person might have given him shelter or he might have done some kind of work for others. It is said that a well-to-do family had 9 cows. These cows strayed away from the family pastures and got lost. Surdas located them and informed the head of the family. This gentleman built a hut for him and he stayed there and worked for the family. He might have felt secured then. He earned a little money this way and remembered his parents. He used to give them some money. This shows the inherent nobility in the child.

Surdas ought to have some inherent capabilities otherwise he could not have become such a great poet. Nature had not given him the sight but certainly it had given him musical ears and a good voice. How he managed to educate himself we do not know. But it could be possible that he picked up bhajans sung by others. Also, seeing his sweet voice and his ability to sing someone might have helped him to become a musician. Whatever might be the facts, he soon acquired fame as a singer of bhajans and people flocked to him to hear him. He came to be known as Surswami and his monetary condition too improved. This also gave him a religious bent of mind. Now he thought of moving towards the religious centers of his times. He went home, called his father and gave him all that he possessed and began his pilgrimage with his co-singers or admirers. Finally, he built a hut for him on the bank of Jamuna River at Gau-ghat—a place between Mathura and Agra. He lived there and sang bhajans and his admirers and followers lived with Surswami when they desired.

The great philosopher Vallabhacharya happened to pass through Gau-ghat on his way to Vrindavan. Hearing this news, Surswami met him. He sang two compositions of his: 'Prabhu ho sub patitanko nayak' and 'Prabhu ho sub patitanko tiko'. Seeing the moving pathos of the compositions Vallabh said: "Sur you are the embodiment of sur (melody), why do you sing these pathetic songs? Sing the glory of the Lord." Sur replied: "I know nothing of God's glory, how am I to sing his glory. Kindly let me experience his glory and take me under your shelter." Sur's words moved Vallabh and the latter took him as his disciple. Sur left his hut and accompanied Vallabh to Vrindavan. On the way Vallabh recited Bhagvat and gave discourse on many other scriptures for the benefit of his followers. Sur came to know Vallabh's philosophy during this journey. They reached Govardhan Giriraj and Sur saw the idol of Shrinathji. On the spot he sang 'Vraj bhayo maharika put' in the rag Dev-ghandhar. From this day Surswami became Surdas. We do not know the date when Surdas sang this song but it could be sometime between 1500 and 1510. At that time Surdas' age would be between 21 and 31 years.

The Shrinathji's idol was installed in a makeshift temple at Govardhan Giriraj in the year 1500. There, Kumbhandas was asked to sing bhajans to the Lord. He was living in Sadu Pande's house. Vallabh asked Surdas to join Kumbhandas and live with him. He was free to sing bhajans there whenever he liked. At that date the temple of Shriji was under construction. It was completed in 1520 but in 1510 the Shriji's idol was kept in the incomplete temple. At that date four singers were appointed to sing bhajans before the idol. Surdas was one of them. For his stay arrangements were made in the nearby Parasoli village. He was then 31 years old and he lived in Parasoli for the rest of his life.

It is said that Surdas 'poured out his heart in matchless music at the feet of Sri Krishna in the Srinath temple. His music resounded in this temple all his life.' He composed 100,000 songs of which 4,634 songs are collected in Sur-sagar alone. These 4,634 songs are composed using 75 ragas of the Indian music. His remaining songs are in 23 books of which some are still (1995) unpublished. How many of 100,000 songs have survived in these books, no one has calculated so far. It is said that if his other works are taken into account along with Sur-sagar, then Surdas has used 84 ragas of the Indian music.

Today, Surdas' compositions are sung by the Drupad singers in the Drupad style, the Khayal singers in the Khayal style, the Thumari singers in the Thumari style and the Bhajan singers in the Bhajan style. Actually, Surdas' compositions are in the Drupad style and are now labeled as 'Haveli Sangeet'.

On the last day of Surdas' life, Chaturbhujdas complained that he wrote so many songs addressed to the Lord but did not write even one on Vallabh. Hearing this complaint, on the spot, Surdas burst out in a song addressed to Vallabh, which is famous to this day. It is 'bharoso dradh in charnan kero'. Vithalnath asked then: "Surdas how is the status of your consciousness?" He once again replied with a song: 'khanjan nen rup ras mate', which is equally famous. Singing these two songs, he passed away near Govind Kund in 1583.

## **LEGENDS**

Fortunately, there are not many legends associated with Surdas' name. This is as it should be. Being blind, Surdas passed his daytime in the temple and lived in Parasoli village nearby all his mature life. It is said that Surdas wanted to write 125,000 songs on the glory of Krishna but he could not do so and the old age was upon him. He was very sorry about this circumstance. Krishna read the devotee's mind and he wrote out the remaining 25,000 songs with the combined name Sur-Shyam, in which Sur stands for Surdas and Shyam stands for Krishna.

I have relied on Thakur Jaidev Singh and on the Pusti Marg sources in writing this biography. Many great singers have sung Surdas' bhajans and many of these are recorded and are available in the market.

## **TULSIDAS (1532-1623)**

Tulsidas is, without any doubt, the greatest Hindi poet of India. Until recent times he reigned supreme in the most part of Northern India. This comprised Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Rabindranath Tagore surpassed him when his works influenced all the languages of India. And he was hailed as a world poet.

Tulsidas, in his works, has immortalized Ram and Sita as Surdas, in his works, has immortalized Krishna. Tulsidas (1532) had wider fame than Surdas (1478) but the latter, being senior, had influenced Tulsidas' works in Vraj Bhasaa. Tulsidas wrote Krishna-gitavali in Vraja-bhasa and 'he emulated some' songs of Surdas.

Many scholars have written on Tulsidas eloquently and it is not my intention to quote them all. A few eulogies would suffice. Rev. C. Bulke said: "In his introduction, the author prays that his poem may be appreciated: "Show me your favor and grant this boon, that my verses may be honored where good men are gathered together."

“There is no shadow of doubt, that the poet’s prayer has been heard. The [Tulsi Ramayan] enjoys ... among the teeming millions of North India, popularity unequalled anywhere else.

“This popularity is richly deserved. All critics agree that the [Tulsi Ramayan] is the most excellent poem of the whole range of Hindi literature. Dr. George Grierson goes even further when he says: “I still think that Tulsidas is the most important figure in the whole of Indian literature.”...”

Dr. Vincent Smith said that Tulsidas’ work is “the tallest tree in the magic garden of medieval Hindu poetry.” He further added: “His name will not be found in the Ain-i-Akbari or in the pages of any Muslim analyst, or in the books by European authors based on the narratives of Persian historians. Yet that Hindu was the greatest man of his age in India, greater even than Akbar himself, inasmuch as the conquest of the hearts and minds of millions of men and women effected by the poet was achievement infinitely more lasting and important than any or all of the victories gained in the war by the monarch.”

Vinoba Bhave has paid his tribute to Tulsidas by an equation: Tulsi-Ramayan = Bible + Shakespeare. He also said that Bharatan Kumarappa, who was reading Tulsi-Ramayan with him, agreed with the above equation and his evaluation.

Devendra Singh, a recent biographer of Tulsi wrote: “Tulsidas occupies a unique position among the world’s great writers in so far as he was a poet who was no mere poet but a seeker engaged in a ceaseless endeavor to get into touch with Reality and a saint who was no mere saint but a humanist whose writings have made a tremendous impact on the life and culture of his people. His crowning achievement as one of the greatest exponents of the core of Indian cultural and spiritual heritage is that he brought to his people a positive message of hope and fulfillment by going beyond the conflicting positions of the metaphysical speculators and asserting a living and vital faith in divine light and love and a divine personality, which redeems and liberates.” In short, he was a great writer ‘not of an age but for all times.’

## **BIODATA**

Name: Rambola

Birth Place: Tari, ‘on the banks of the Yamuna and only ten or twelve miles away from Rajapur had the best claim’. Today, Rajapur in the Banda district of the Uttar Pradesh is considered as his birth place because he lived there.

Birth date: some time in 1532

Mother’s name: Hulsi

Father’s name: Atmaram Dube

School: Shesh Sanatan’s pathsala in Banares

Works: Ram-Charit-Manas (Tulsi-Ramayan, his magnum opus), Vinaya-Patrika, Kavitavali, Barwai-Ramayan, Krishna-gitavali, Gitavali, Dohavali, Ramagya-Prasna, Vairagya Sandipani, Janki-mangal, Parvati-mangal and Ramlala-Nahachhu. These are twelve in number. Of these only Ram-Charit-Manas (1574), Ramagya-Prasna (not available to me) and Parvati-mangal (1586) bear the commencement date, which I have shown in the bracket..

Death Place: Assi-ghat, Banares

Death date: some time 1623

## **EARLY LIFE**

We know very little about Tulsi’s life. His birth place and birth date are controversial. People of seven towns or villages have claimed that Tulsi was born in their native place. The scholars have chosen Tari as Tulsi’s birth place on the basis of circumstantial evidences. Tulsi’s biographer, Venimadhavdas, who died in 1642, wrote ‘Gosai Chritra’, in which 1497 is stated to be Tulsi’s year of birth. Another scholar, Shivsingh Sangar, who wrote his book ‘Shivsingh Saroj’, informed us that Tulsi was born about the year 1526. An English writer, H. H. Wilson, gave in his article 1543 as Tulsi’s year of birth because he thought that Tulsi began to write his Ramayan at the age of 31 and Tulsi himself wrote in his Ramayan that he began writing it on March 31, 1574. However, many scholars agree with Dr. George Grierson that 1532 is the likely year, in which Tulsi was born. And, I have chosen 1532 for the above bio data.

Tulsi's early life was certainly miserable and he did not write much about it. He did write here and there a few lines on his childhood in his Kavitavali and Vinaya-Patrika but these writings are not enough to give a biographical sketch. We refer to these few lines here. He wrote in Kavitavali:

- "My parents left me after I was brought forth into the world."
- "Even the Creator did not send me out into the world with any luck; there were no rejoicing on my birth."
- He was roaming in the street without food and clothing and said: "begging by day and sleeping in some lonely mosque."
- "Luckless as I was, they avoided very shadow of my body."
- "Urged by the pangs of hunger, you [Tulsi] had to beg at the doors of all kinds of high and low caste people. The world knows this."

These lines are enough to tell us in what a bad strait he was. Why this happened to him we do not know for certain. Why his parents left him to his fate: was it poverty or something else? How are we to decide? It is said that his mother died soon after his birth. Was this the cause? Who knows? Tulsi blamed none but his luck. He said: "You [Tulsi] were born in this good country, Bharat, in a good family, with a fine personality and good society."

In which year Tulsi's wandering life, without food and shelter, came to an end we do not know. It seems that he might have discovered some sadhus and sanyasis who more or less lived like him. He might have followed them wherever they went. In his work, Vinaya Patrika, he wrote: "taking pity on my miserable plight the saints said, 'grieve not'." Finally, he came into contact with a kind sadhu or sanyasi Narharidas or Nahariyanad who took him under his shelter. A vague reference to this incident could be traced to in a few lines of Vinaya Patrika. Tulsi wrote: "Bound down by the strong shackles of Karma and the ego, I suffered greatly but the Lord of the suffering and the helpless, Sri Ram, freed me from the bondage of Karma when he saw how greatly I suffered. The moment the Guru questioned me I replied, 'I want to serve you. I have none whom I could call mine. I grasp your feet'. The Guru patted me on the back, held my arms and made me his own (disciple)." He was well treated by his Guru. He got now daily bread. And a few clothes sufficed him. He was called then Rambola. This is testified by Tulsi himself. He said: "I am a servant of Ram. Ram has given me the name Rambola." Narharidas belonged to the Ramanand sect and he initiated Tulsi in his fold. Tulsi wrote: "The Guru taught me that devotion to Ram is best and I like this (straight path) which is like the King's highway."

Narharidas had his residence or ashram in Sukerkhet which is a place of pilgrimage near Ayodhya at the confluence of the rivers Saryu and Ghoghara. Here alas Tulsi found a home after going through a tough time. His Guru again and again told him Ram-katha (Ram's story) and this entered in his memory and heart. He admitted that he was too young to grasp its full meaning. Anyway this was but natural. He never forgot this first Guru. His biographer Singh wrote:

"When the poet did begin to write his own version of the story of Ram, he did not fail to recall with gratitude 'the lotus-feet' of his Guru, 'the very ocean of compassion, Hari himself in the shape of Nar (a human being), whose words are like the rays of the sun to dispel the deep darkness of illusion' and whose teachings laid bare 'all the hidden and manifest jewels of the story of Ram in whatever mines they may be embedded.' His Guru, the place where he learnt his first lesson, the Saryu, Ayodhya and the life and culture of the people among whom he lived and moved in his early life left a permanent impression on his mantel make-up and his writings."

Tulsi spent a few years with his Guru Narharidas. When his Guru decided to visit Kashi (Banares) along with his disciples, Tulsi got a chance to visit this great City of Learning. When they reached Kashi, Tulsi got the glimpse of the city, which was to become his home in the future. At the time of his Guru's visit to Kashi, Shesh Sanatan was considered to be the most learned man of the city and was fond of training promising students. This scholar did not fail to see Tulsidas' merit and Tulsi too was eager to study under him. Narharidas came to realize Tulsi's eagerness to study under Sanatan in Kashi. He asked his pupil to stay on in Kashi and pursue his studies. In Kashi, Tulsidas studied Sanskrit, poetics, literature, philosophy, religion, astrology and various other subjects under the guidance of Shesh Sanatan. In due course, he completed his studies and became a very learned man himself. After the death of Shesh

Sanatan, Tulsi had to find his own livelihood. The question before him was where to go. Obviously, he remembered his family home in Rajapur and decided to move there.

Tulsidas went to Rajapur and reopened his closed house and cleaned it. He settled there. But we know nothing about his domestic life because he wrote nothing about it in his works. His biographer Singh tells us that he married Ratnavali, daughter of Dinbandhu Pathak. She was “an exceptionally intelligent, bright and beautiful young lady who shared her husband’s religious interests and devotion to Ram. It was a happy married life. The young husband made a living by reciting the story of Ram, in which he was very well grounded, to enthusiastic audiences and, if a stray reference in the Vinaya Patrika is to be taken on its face value, ‘his middle age was spent in trade, agriculture and various expedients’.”

This happy life too came to an end due to a trifle incident. This trifle incident is narrated by Singh as follows: “Tulsi loved his wife so well that he would not allow her even to pay a visit to her parents. One day in his absence and without his permission, his wife left for her father’s house in the company of her brother who had come to see her. Unable to bear the separation, the young poet left the same night for his father-in-law’s house even though he had to cross a river. The wife, taken back by the ardor and impetuosity ... told him in rebuke, ‘If you bore half the love that you have for my fleshly body towards Ram, you would surely freed from the fears and sufferings of human life.’” These words touched the very core of Tulsi’s being. He decided there and then to renounce the worldly life. He walked out into wilderness.

### **LIFE IN AYODHYA AND BENARES**

We do not know his wandering life because he did not write his travelogues. He might have roamed around and visited many pilgrim sites. From the beautiful description of places in his Ramayan, it is deduced that he had visited Jagannath Puri, Ramesvaram, Dwaravati, Badrikashram and various pilgrim places in the Himalayas. There is a living depiction of Mansarovar in his Ramayan and his biographer is inclined to say that Tulsi likely had visited the Himalayan Lake. His favorite places where he spent much longer time were four in number, namely, Prayag, Ayodhya, Chitrkut and Kashi. Prayag is considered even today as the most sacred place due to the confluence of rivers Ganga and Yamuna. And we find in Tulsi’s ‘Kavitavli’ a moving physical charm of this sacred place. He wrote: “A wave of delight sweeps over my heart at the sight of the confluence of the white and dark waters of the Ganga and the Yamuna. It looks as if a horde of charming white young ones of the Celestial Cow were frisking about and grazing over a bed of green grass.” Ayodhya was the place where he spent his childhood in the ashram of his first Guru. It is also Ram’s birth place. In Chitrkut he did his meditation and found peace and enlightenment that he desired. And, Kashi was the City of Learning where he became a learned man. He chose to live in these places as follows: “In January during ‘Makar Sankranti’ he would stay at Prayag. In February and March he moved on to Chitrakut. In April, the month in which his Lord Ram was born, he would remain in Ayodhya. From there he would proceed to Kashi. After the rains he would go to Mithila ...”

It is said that during these wanderings he wrote his short early works Ramagya-Prasna and Vairagya Sandipani. These were the years of his quest for the supreme Reality and his inner development. He was ready now to write his magnum opus Ram-Charit-Manas and the right place to write it was Ayodhya, the birth place of Ram. He arrived in Ayodhya at the age of about 40. He began to write his Ramayan on 31 March 1574—the date, which coincided with Ram’s birthday according to the Indian calendar. In this holy place, he completed the first three chapters of Ramayan. But he soon found that this holy place was not as holy as he desired. He wrote in his Dohavali: “The temples and holy places are dens of evil and corruption. The rulers rule by striking terror in the hearts of their subjects and the number of bullies and ruffians, ever ready to stir up trouble, runs into thousands.” Naturally, Tulsi decided to leave Ayodhya. The next holy place he knew was Kashi and he went there. Of Kashi he said: It is “the homeland of Siva and Parvati, a storehouse of knowledge and learning, a place which destroys sin and gives freedom from bondage.” Here he settled down for the rest of his life.

After coming to Kashi, it took a few years to complete his Ramayan. His recitation of it on the banks of Ganges attracted people in hordes. We do not require adding that it was the most satisfying Ramayan in the language of the people. This, it was and is. This is self

evident from the praise of contemporary scholars and those of today. People simply loved to hear it again and again. Tulsidas' fame soared and with it his distracters also grew. They began to harass him. This is clear from his prayer to the Shiv, the presiding deity of Kashi: "During the day I am jostled about by cheats, and by night I am surrounded by thieves; unless you keep a kindly eye on me, my stay in this city would be made impossible." Vinoba Bhawe said: In the beginning, Tulsidas stayed at one Ghat (terraced bank of a river) on the Ganges. There his distracters harassed him so much that he went to the second Ghat—from Panch-Ganga to Manikarnika Ghat. Here too people from different 'Panth' (fold) harassed him. So he went to the next Ghat. This way, he ended up at Assi-Ghat, which was and is on the out skirt of Kashi. There he lived peacefully. Fortunately, Tulsidas had good friends in Kashi. Specifically, Todarmal prevailed upon him not to leave Kashi. They assured him that they would take care of him. Tulsidas too won over his enemies because his life was pure and simple. He was free from passion and prejudice, which mar human life.

Among his friends in Kashi, we remember two of them for their generosity and genuine admiration for the poet. One of his best friends was Pandit Gangaram Joshi, who lived at Prahlad Ghat. Tulsidas used to be his guest often. Once Joshi offered Tulsidas a tenth of million of rupees. Tulsidas refused to touch even a rupee but made his friend to build 12 Hanuman temples, including the one at Sankat Mochan in Kashi, spending about 12,000 rupees. Today, the Sankat Mochan Hanuman temple 'continues to be one of the most popular in the city.' Todarmal was another good friend who truly admired the poet. Tulsidas trusted him so much that he had given one copy of his Ramayan for safe keeping. Tulsidas' biographer Singh tells us: "When Todarmal died, a panchnama (deed of arbitration) dated September 27, 1612 was drawn up under which Todarmal's landed property was partitioned among his successors. A few lines at the top of this deed are said to be in the poet's own handwriting. This deed remained with the members of the family of Todarmal and passed on from one generation to another till it reached the safe custody of the Raja of Kashi. Tulsidas seldom wrote anything about human personalities, but the moving lines he wrote on the death of Todarmal reflect the depth of his feeling for the friend he had lost. 'The lamp of the life of a man truly large-hearted, ruler of four villages has gone out in these evil days. ... Now that he has gone to the world of Ram, Tulsidas is no longer worried, his only regret is that he will have to go through life without a pure hearted friend.' It is said that when Tulsidas had to leave Gopal Mandir on account of the opposition of the Gosains of Vallabh group, Todarmal asked him to come and stay in his own temple at Assi."

From the above account we see that the life of Tulsidas in Kashi was not that bad. He wrote in Kavita-vali: "Drinking the water of Bhagirathi (Ganges) and repeating the name of Ram is my daily routine." His favorite resorts in Kashi were four: Prahlad Ghat, Gopal Mandir, Sankat Mochan and Assi-Ghat. In Prahlad Ghat his friend Joshi's house was situated where he lived occasionally. He wrote some part of Vinaya Patrika in Gopal Mandir. The temple of Hanuman was constructed at Sankat Mochan as per his desire. Assi-Ghat was the place where he spent his last days.

Surdas (1478-1583), Nanddas, Banarsidas, Keshavdas, Hit Harivansha, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khana (Rahim) and Raskhan were contemporary poets of Tulsidas. Whether these poets ever met one another we do not know because we have no historical records. What we know for certain is this. Tulsidas was very fond of Surdas' bhajans. He wrote Krishna-gitavali in Vraja-Bhasha, and not in his Awadhi, showed that he followed the style of Surdas. Banarsidas was a Jain from Jaunpur. He wrote a poem in praise of Ramayan. Tulsidas did not fail to see Banarsidas' warmth and he wrote a melodious 'stuti' (hymn) on Parshawanath (c. 800 BC) who was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Jain Tirthankar and the king of Banares. Rahim and Tulsidas admired each other. And Madhusudan Sarasvati, a renowned Sanskrit scholar and a Shivite, paid a glorious tribute to Tulsidas for his poetry and for his crystal pure life. Finally, Tulsidas had received his due.

Tulsidas was now a famous man, both among great scholars and laymen. His fame bothered him. He wrote: "Time was when I begged from door to door, and now the rulers of the land are at my feet. Tulsidas was [then] without Ram." With Ram by his side, the Lord had "turned a handful of dust into one mightier than the mountains," that he was being hailed as one of "the great sages of the day." "If a lean and poverty stricken grass-cutter should come by a mountain load of gold, this would remove only the poverty of his house, not the poverty of his heart." In his heyday Tulsidas saw himself as a humble man. He did not forget his past and continued to live his simple life. But the old age was catching on him fast.

Tulsidas' KavitaVali and Vinaya Patrika give us some information about the poet's life in his declining years but the picture is not very clear. One thing is certain that he was not keeping good health. He wished that if God wanted him to live any longer, then He should free him from all illness. That was not to be. He gradually declined and the end came during the year 1623 on the bank of Ganga at Assi-Ghat in Kashi. He left this world in all glory but a sad man. He wrote some time before his death: "The farmers have no fields to cultivate, the beggars get no alms, the businessmen have no vocation, and servicemen seek job in vain. The people in dire distress asking one another, 'Where shall we go? What shall we do?'"... This was the world he lived and died in.

### **TULSIDAS AS A MAN**

Tulsidas himself has left behind his caricature. He wrote: "Some say this Tulsi does a lot of evil, some say he is an imposter, some others that he is a sincere servant of Ram; the saintly take me for a great saint, the villains for a great villain. The waves of a million such true and false reports gather up round me. I ask no favors nor do I complain. I bear with all and do not let my heart be perturbed. The good and the evil which will befall Tulsi are in the hands of Ram. Verily, I am like the grass which thrives only in the soil of the love of Ram." This shows that Tulsidas was a simple broad-minded man. This can be easily deduced from his works. He wrote in praise of Ram in his Ramayan. He also wrote in praise of Krishna in his Krishna-gitavli using the language of Krishna worshippers, namely, Vraj-Bhasha. In Parvati Mangal, he expressed his gratitude to Shiva and Parvati because he genuinely believed that Shiva was his Guru who taught him to love Ram. He wrote a hymn on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Thirthankar and conveyed his respect to the followers of the Jain religion and their religion. In short, he respected the followers of Shiva, Krishna, Buddha and Mahavir. His biographer Singh tells us that 'he sincerely attempted a synthesis of the various schools of Indian philosophy. But he adhered firmly to his own experience in the quest of truth, truth as he saw it.' Tulsidas also said: "I am willing to acknowledge anyone as my guru who can expound knowledge without reference of ignorance; or describe light out of the context of darkness or set forth the formless without reference to form."

Tulsidas was a sincere devotee of Ram. He said: "The love of Ram is born in a simple heart and reflected in simple speech and action." Tulsidas lived as he said. He was indeed a simple hearted man. Those who knew him said: "A friend of the friendly, a lover of Ram, free from malice or rancor, detached, natural and simple in his dealings." His biographer Singh adds: "He won the confidence of all who came in contact with him [for] he seems to have been a remarkably gentle and lovable man who would never make an enemy if he could help it."

### **TULSIDAS AS A PHILOSOPHER**

Tulsidas was a very learned man. He had studied Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas thoroughly as we find the gems of these works in his own great works. He himself has written his philosophy very well and we will follow his own words. He says his Ram is the same as that of Vedas and of Yogis. We read now his words: "Yes, between the Finite (sagun) and the Infinite (nirgun), there is no difference. For the love of the devotee the Infinite, the Ineffable, the Formless, the Unborn becomes Finite even as water and snow are not separate." "The Finite and the Infinite are the two forms of Brahma the Indescribable, the Fathomless, the Beginning-less, the Incomparable. To my mind, the Name is greater than both because the Name brings both under its sway." "And please do not treat this assertion of mine as a piece of bold fancy. I am saying something born of my own experience and love and faith. Knowledge both of the Infinite and the Finite is like fire. The Infinite is like the fire implicit in the wood. The Finite is like the explicit flame which all can see. That is why I have said that the Name is greater than Brahma." "The Name and He for whom the Name stands are one but they are related as master and servant." "The Name immediately calls up the form." "The Name is the witness of both the Finite and the Infinite." "The living Ram could bless only the people in the Dandaka forest but innumerable are the human hearts which his Name has purified and redeemed." "Bhakti is free, independently, without extraneous aids." "Knowledge itself is subservient to it." "Who knows who will go to hell and who to heaven? Life in the world here below is very good indeed for Tulsidas as a devotee of Ram."

Tulsidas' biographer Singh has remarked: "Scholarly attempts have been made to identify the school of philosophical thoughts to which Tulsidas subscribed and it is remarkable that the advocates of all schools—the monists, the dualists, and the believers in a qualified monism—are able to gather plausible points in favor of their own particular school. This only shows how at home the poet was in the tenets of each school while remaining faithful to his own integrated view of the life divine." Singh ends with Tulsidas' words: "He alone can realize the self who has left behind the three illusions." In Vinoba's view Tulsidas' philosophy is 'Traitam SevaDharma'.

## **HIS WORKS**

Tulsidas' famous works are Ram-Charit-Manas (Tulsi-Ramayan) and Vinaya Patrika. The Ramayan is massive whereas Vinaya Patrika is concise. The former consists of the Ram story and requires to be read to see its beauty. It is written in the meter Chopai and Doha. Its language is pure Avadhi. The latter consists of 279 songs or poems and the language is pure Vraj-Bhasha and is musical. It is considered as Tulsidas' spiritual autobiography. The next important work of Tulsidas is Kavita-Vali. It is partly autobiographical and partly in praise of Ram and Sita. It consists of 379 quatrains that also include the famous Hanuman Bahuk. It is written in Vraj-Bhasha and meters used are Kavita and Savaiya. Dohavali consists of 573 couplets that include 34 Doha of 'Chatak Chautisa'. In Dohavali Tulsidas touches upon worldly wisdom and in Chatak Chautisa he expounds on his ideals. Tulsidas has also written another Ramayan, which is called Barwai Ramayan. It consists of 69 verses and the language used is pure Avadhi. The meter used is Barwai and is a rare one. Barwai explains the title Barwai Ramayan.

Tulsidas wrote Ramlala Nahachhu, Janki Mangal and Parvati Mangal (1586) especially for women. The language used in all the three is Avadhi and the meter is sohar. Women sing these on festive occasions like marriage. The first one describes colorful scenes during Ram's marriage. It consists of only 20 stanzas. The second one describes Janki's (Sita's) marriage to Ram. It consists of 216 stanzas. The last one describes Parvati's marriage to Shiva.

Krishna Gitavali consists of 61 songs or bhajans in praise of Krishna and reminds us of Surdas. It is written in pure Vraj-Bhasha and is musical. Gitavali is Ram's story in songs. It consists of random colorful scenes from Ramayan, which could be rendered in musical compositions. Here Tulsidas' interest in music comes to the fore. In Vairagya Sandipani, Tulsidas deals with philosophical questions, which are inherent in renunciation of life.

## **LEGENDS**

There are many legends current about Tulsidas and we would like to skip them. I will give a single legend, which is often told. This is about Hanuman and his relationship with Tulsidas. A man used to attend Tulsidas' recitation of Ramayan every day. He was first to come and last to go. Tulsidas noticed this. Tulsidas believed that Shiv, Hanuman, Laksman and Bharat understood what true devotion is. He concluded that the man who never failed to miss his recitation was no other than Hanuman. He caught the man's feet and told him to appear as he is. Hanuman appeared before him and he took Tulsidas under his shelter. He asked Ram to meet Tulsidas in Chitrakut and Ram did.

## **VINOBA BHAVE'S COMMENTS ON TULSIDAS**

Vinoba said that Tulsidas wrote many works. Among these, Ramayan and Vinaya Patrika are special. Both are of different kind and both are unique. They cannot be compared. Ramayan is a work for the masses, which include devotees. Vinaya Patrika is for the devotees. It is through the devotees that it reaches to the masses. Then he said: Vinaya Patrika has affected me more than Ramayan because it is concise. He wrote then Vinyanjali as his tribute to Tulsidas. Vinayak is Bhava's name. Vinyanjali is a work, in which, Vinoba has chosen 170 pads or songs out of 279 pads of Vinaya Patrika. Of these 170 pads, 108 are as it is—the remaining 62 are fragmentary. In an Appendix to Vinyanjali, Vinoba has given some lines from the 11 more pads of Vinaya Patrika as epistles. This shows Vinoba's love for Tulsidas.

Vinoba further commented: Tulsi and Kabir are two names in Uttar Pradesh (U. P). And, Tulsi is more prominent than Kabir. What is Jnaneshwar in Maharashtra, so is Tulsi in

U.P. Then he goes on to compare various Ramayan that are written in India. Before we go further we list these Ramayan in various languages below.

- In Sanskrit we have: Valmiki Ramayan, Yogavasisht Ramayan, Adhyatma Ramayan and Brahmanand Tatva Sangraha Ramayan. These are dated from time immemorial to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Bhavbhuti wrote 'Uttar Ramcharit'.
- In Tamil: Poet Kamban wrote his Ramayan in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.
- In Telugu four poets wrote their Ramayan—Rangnath's 'Dwipat Ramayan', Tikkan's 'Nirvachatar Ramayan', 'Bhaskar Ramayan', 'Mola Ramayan' and Kochmanch Tilma's Telugu Ramayan.
- In Malyalam: Ezhuttacchan wrote Adhyatma Ramayan in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.
- In Kannad: Narhari Thorve wrote a Ramayan in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Jamini Laxmi too wrote a Ramayan.
- In Bengali, Kritibas wrote 'Sri Ram Pandali' known as Kritibas Ramayan in 15<sup>th</sup> Century.
- In Asami: Madhav Kandli wrote a Ramayan in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century.
- In Udia: Balram Das wrote his Ramayan in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.
- In Marathi: There are four Ramayans - Eknath's 'Bhavrath Ramayan', Krishnadas Mudgal's 'Yuddhakand', 'Muktesvar Ramayan' and Samarth Ramdas' 'Laghu Ramayan'. Later, Sridhar and Moropant too wrote their Ramayans.
- In Gujarati: Malan, Haridas Durgadas and Girdhar wrote their Ramayan. Of Girdhar Ramayan (1837 AD), the renowned poet Umashankar Joshi wrote: "I must confess today that Girdhar Ramcharitra is poetically not so rich. It is rather placid and staid, rarely rising to imaginative height. But it is popular and is widely read even today."

Now we see what Vinoba said about these Ramayan. He said that these Ramayan are the best in the respective languages and are popular among the masses. In particular, he singles out Kamban and says that his Ramayan in Tamil is comparable to Shakespeare in poetics. Even then, it has not attained the level of Tulsid Ramayan. Kamban was a great poet, Tulsidas was a great man. Then he compares Aknath of Maharashtra with Tulsidas of Uttar Pradesh. He says: Aknath and Tulsidas were contemporaries. Tulsid was one year older than Aknath. Both lived in Kashi at the same time. Both completed the writing of their great work during their residence in Kashi. Aknath's Bhagvat and Tulsid's Ramayan are close in thought and in structure. Aknath too wrote a Ramayan but his soul descended in Bhagvat. Aknath was a Krishna bhakt, Tulsid was a Ram bhakt. The quality of Aknath's Bhagvat is not found in any other Indian languages. So is Tulsid's Ramayan. It is unique.

## **TWO BHAJANS FROM VINAYA PATRIKA**

We are quite familiar by now with Vinaya Patrika and its merit. We select two compositions from it, which are very popular. The one is 'tu dayalu din ho tu dani ho bhikhari' and the other one is 'yah binati Raghuvir gusai'. The first one is sung by Bani Sarkar and the music is composed by Jnan Ghosh. The record number is Columbia GE 7943. The second one is sung by Madhuri Khare and the music was composed by her father Narayan Moreshwar Khare. The record number is Columbia GE 8436. The first one is likely to be in Raga Bhimpalasi and the second one is likely to be in Raga Paraj. I have heard these records 50 years back and I might be in error in naming the Ragas. Tulsidas' biographer Singh has given the English version of these two songs as follows. The first one reads: "Lord, you are full of compassion and I am indigent, you are the alms-giver and I am the alms-man. I am a well-known sinner and you are the destroyer of sin. You are the Lord and master of all who have none to protect them, and where is the orphan like me? There is none more miserable than I am and none who takes away men's miseries as you do. You are the Supreme Reality and I am the individual soul; you are the master, I am the servant. You are my father, mother, friend and guru, a well-wisher at all points. Many are the bonds of relationship between you and me. You may treat me as you choose. All that Tulsid asks for is that you will redeem him in the manner it is possible." The second one reads: "This is my prayer, Raghuvir, my master. Take away all the hope, faith and trust I put in others and all the ignorance of the individual soul. I ask not for salvation or knowledge or wealth, spiritual accomplishments or surpassing greatness. All I want is that a disinterested love for your lotus-feet should grow and develop in me as the days pass by. Whatever the places to which I am driven by the forces of ruthless Karma (action entailing consequences), all I ask for is that you will not withdraw your affection for me even for a moment even as the tortoise does not part from its eggs. All love all affection, all relationships, whatever binds this mortal frame to this world may be gathered up

at a single point and directed only towards my Lord and master. This is the prayer of Tulsidas.”

In writing this biography I have relied on Devendra Singh, A recent biographer of Tulsidas. His book ‘Tulsi Ka Antarjagat’ is highly acclaimed.

## CHAPTER 6



**Area: 50,382 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: (H: % / M: %) / Source: 2001 Census.**

### NANAKDEV (1469-1539)

Nanakdev was one of the greatest saints of India. He like Buddha and Mahavir founded a new religion—the Sikh Dharma. In this respect he differed from the other great saints of India. He also differed in his approach to God. He did not believe in reincarnation (avtarvad) of God. He was much of a philosopher who believed firmly in One Formless God. This is testified by his work Japuji, which we see here later. Nanakdev did not believe in idol worship, rituals and caste. His Dharma was for householders and not for ascetics. He told his followers to earn their livelihood by honest labor, to share their earnings and to take or repeat God's name (kirat karni, vand chhakna te nam japna). He said that we are all children of one God and so we are all brothers. He repeated that God is the father of all (subna jian ka ek data). His philosophy was to proclaim: "Truth is higher than everything but higher is the living of truth." He said: "Asceticism does not lie in ascetic robes, or in walking staffs, or in ashes. Asceticism does not lie in the erring, or in the shaven head, or in the blowing of a conch. It lies in remaining pure amidst impurities." These are great words. He made men out of weaklings, who stood later against the might of the Moghul Empire. In this sense he was Shahenshah, the Emperor of Emperors. And yet, he was a saint among saints.

### BIODATA

Name: Nanak

Birth Place: Talwandi, Rai Bhoi. It is 65 km South of Lahore in Pakistan. It is called Nankanasaheb today.

Birth date: some time in 1469

Mother's name: Truptaji

Father's name: Kalyanchand Bedi

School: He studied Hindi in Gopal Pandit's pathshala. He studied Sanskrit from Vrajlal Pandit and Persian from Kutubudin.

Works: Japuji, Patti, Arati, Daksinya Omkar, Siddh Gosti, Salok, Sabad and Sakhi. Besides these works, Asa-di-war, Rahidas and Sohila are his famous works.

Death Place: Kartarpur

Death date: some time in 1539

## **EARLY LIFE**

Nanak's father was in the service of a landlord (Jagirdar or Zamindar) named Rai Bular. He was known to people as Kaluchand Bedi or Kaluchand Patwari. He was also addressed as Mehta. In short, he was the manager of landlord's estate. His mother was a pious lady who had faith in Bhakti (Devotion). They had a daughter whom they had named Nanki. When their son was born they named him Nanak—a name, which was derived from the elder sister's name Nanki. Grammatically, Nanak is the masculine form of Nanki. In India, there was a custom to give the younger brother a name derived from the elder sister's name. These sister and brother had deep love for each other and they were practically inseparable. This would be clear from two incidents later on. The father also consulted an astrologer, named, Pandit Hardayal, who predicted that the boy was to be a great man in future.

From childhood Nanak was introspective. He always asked difficult questions for grown up persons. When time came for his thread ceremony, he refused to go through it. He told the priest that this cotton thread was a fake. He did not need it. He told that the Compassion was the true cotton. Obtain from it Contentment as yarn. Then, let Truth and Austerity twist the yarn into a thread, which would be good for this occasion. We do not know what happened next but being a child he might have gone through the ceremony. In the school (pathshala) too he harassed his teacher with difficult questions. No doubt he mastered what was taught to him but he had no interest in any formal education. He did learn Hindi, Sanskrit and Persian from his teachers but he spent more time outside the school. He would take his friends in a field and teach them meditation. His friends would get tired and leave him. Later, they would inform his father where their friend was sitting in meditation. The father would go there and fetch him home. He would then refuse to eat. An Ayurvedic doctor would arrive to find out what was wrong with the boy. Then he interrogated the doctor: "Could you tell me the medicine to overcome Anger, Greed, and Sloth? Did you try the medicine yourself?" The doctor told the family that the boy was not only healthy but also learned.

Kaluchand Bedi did not know how to handle his son. Now he tried to train him in agriculture. He asked him to look after his field and cattle. Nanak would go to his field and sit in meditation. He would address the birds: "You are of Ram and this field too is of Ram. Please eat as much as you can till your belly is full (Ramki chidiya, Ramka khet, kha lo bharbhar pet)." Sometimes his cattle would stray into neighbor's field and Kaluchand had to hear the complaint against his son. The father got tired of his son and now thought of training him in business. Kaluchand gave Nanak Rupees twenty and asked him to go to a neighboring village and try his hand in doing some business. He went along with a servant to Chanhadka. On the way he found a band of monks. He talked to them and came to know that they had not eaten for a day or two. He spent all the money to feed them and look after their other needs. He returned home without a penny. The servant informed the father what his son did with the money. Now the father lost his temper and punished the son. Nanki, the elder sister, happened to be in the parental home. She intervened and told her father that she would take her brother with her. And she did take her brother to her home in Sultanpur when she went there.

## **LIFE IN SULTANPUR**

In Sultanpur, Nanak's brother-in-law, Jairamji, was a Diwan (a ministerial post) of the Nawab (a small ruler) of Kapurthala. He arranged a job for Nanak in Nawab's granary, where the farmers deposited their due share of grains. Here too, monks and wanderers gathered round him and took full advantage of his generosity. Nawab was informed about Nanak's behavior but he was sensible. He knew that an honest superintendent was far better than a dishonest one. The latter one would pocket much more than Nanak's generosity and the loss would be much more. He was happy with Nanak. Also Nanki, the elder sister, knew how to handle her little brother. Thus Nanak's life went on smoothly. Once, he was filling the bags with a fixed amount of weighed grains and counting the number of bags as one, two, and three and so on. When he came to number thirteen, which is 'tera' in his language, he went on saying 'tera' again and again and could not go to the next number. 'Tera' also meant yours. That is of the God. And he sank into deep reverie feeling that he was of the God. And he forgot all about his job and the counting. Of course, his family members got disturbed knowing Nanak's state of mind. They thought of his marriage so that he understood his responsibility.

In 1488, at the age of 19, Nanak married Sulaxnadevi, the daughter of Mulchand, of the village Pakho. He continued to live in Sultanpur. They had two sons. Srichand was born in 1494 and Laxmichand was born in 1499. His relatives thought that Nanak was now well settled. But that was not to be. He was seeing bickering all around him in the granary and elsewhere. He was gradually realizing the futility of the life he was leading. He decided to quit his job. Perhaps, he gave up his job around 1500 and decided to go on a long pilgrimage. But he had to face his elder sister Nanki. She asked: "What! You want to leave me!" He promised her that any day she remembered him he would present himself before her. And once, she remembered her brother and he happened to reach there on the spot. This was the love and understanding between them.

## **PILGRIMAGE**

Nanak was really a great pilgrim. In this respect too he differed from all the other saints of India. Indian saints did their pilgrimage within the boundary of India but Nanak went all over the known world of his times. In all, he did four pilgrimages. His first pilgrimage was in the Northern part of India. He went from Punjab right up to Assam. His second pilgrimage took him to South India, right up to Lanka (Ceylon). In Lanka, the king Shivrana honored him. His third pilgrimage was to the shrines in the Himalayas. He went to Kashmir, Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. In Tibet his stay in Siddh Gosti is well-known. His fourth pilgrimage took him outside India. He went to Mecca, Medina, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan and some other places. The residents of Baghdad liked Nanak so much that they put up two slabs of stones, with inscription on it, in memory of his visit. One of them could be seen even today. It is about 2 km away from the Baghdad Railway Station. The inscription on the slab is in Arabic and Turkish. How many years he took to complete these pilgrimages, I do not know. Also, I do not know the details of his travelogue. Even if I had known the details, it would take volumes to cover them all. I give below a few memorable incidents that took place during his first pilgrimage.

Perhaps, Nanak began his first pilgrimage around 1500. He first went to Saidpur. There he was invited for dinner by the Diwan of Saidpur and by a carpenter Lalo or Lalu Batai. He dined with the carpenter and not with the Diwan. Later he met the Diwan. When Diwan asked Nanak why didn't he arrive for the dinner? Nanak replied: "I belong to those who are considered low in social status and even among them too who are the lowest. And I have nothing to do with those who are high in social status." "Dear friend, your wealth is due to cruel exploitation of the poor and your dinner smacks of blood whereas Lalo's dinner comes from the honest earning of his sweat and its value is much higher to me." From Saidpur, he went to Talambe. His companions Mardana and Bala were with him. They were singing and Mardana was playing his Rabab. Here they met a notorious thug (robber). Nanak made him to give up his wrong path and made him a good man—a devotee of God. They went next to Haridwar. Here Nanak saw a large number of devotees facing the Sun in the morning with water in their hands. He asked them: "What are you doing here?" They replied: "We are offering water to the Sun-God." Nanak faced away from the Sun and copied the devotees. The devotees cried out: "What are you doing?" Nanak replied: "I am offering water to my fields in my native place." They asked Nanak: "How could this be?" Nanak replied: "If your water could reach the Sun-God million of miles away then my water could also reach my nearby fields." This way the journey went on. In Delhi, Nanak had an encounter with Sikandar Lodi. Here too, his words were the final ones and he won. In Banares, he had a long discourse with Pandit Chaturdas. The latter admired Nanak and became his disciple and devotee. Their learned discourse is contained in 'Daksinya Omkar'. Also, a Gurudwara, called Guru-ka-bag, exists where the discourse took place. This journey did not end here. It was a long one and it is not possible to gather all facts and we should end here.

Around 1525, Nanakdev completed all his pilgrimages and came down to Kartarpur, which he had built. He settled there peacefully with his family. Here, in his old age, he preached his Dharma and wrote his books. When he found that his health didn't permit him to carry on, he entrusted his work to his foremost disciple Lahanaji. On 14 June 1539 he made Lahanaji to sit on his seat and named him as Guru Angad and handed over his charge. Nanakdev's greatness is seen in his recognizing the merit of a man and not in the hereditary rights of his sons. On 22 September 1539, he died in Kartarpur.

In the memory of Nanakdev, there are six Gurudwara in Nankanasahab and six in Sultanpur. His elder son Srichand became a sanyasi and propagated his own Udasin

Sampradaya and his younger son lived a householder's life. The descendents of Nanakdev are known today as 'Bedi Shahjada' (Bedi princes).

## **NANAKDEV'S PHILOSOPHY**

Nanakdev's philosophy is contained in his Japuji. All the works of Nanakdev are contained in Guru Granth Sahib. We begin with the first Mantra of Japuji, which is also the first Mantra of Guru Granth Sahib.

- 1 O Ankar. Satnam. Karta Purakh. Nirbhaou. Nirvair. Akal Murat. Ajuni. Saibham. Gurprasad.  
(Omkar: God is the only One. His name is Truth. He is the creator of whole universe. He is without fear. He is without enemy. His creation is not bound by time: It is timeless. He is unborn. He is self-existent. He is benevolent to all. He is realized by the grace of a Guru.)
- Mana Tu Jyotirswarup Hai, Apna Mula Pachhan. (p. 44, Guru Granth Sahib)  
(Mind, you are the embodiment of Light, recognize your root.)
- Hari Ko Nama Japa Nirmal Karam. (p. 266, Guru Granth Sahib)  
(Take God's name and do pure deeds.)

In these lines we see the main points of Nanakdev's philosophy. It is not my intention to give here the full exposition of either Japuji or Guru Granth Sahib. It is beyond my competence. We will see later Vinoba Bhave's brief exposition on Japuji.

## **JAPUJI AND MAHARSHI DEVENDRANATH TAGORE**

Maharshi Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905) was an admirer of Nanak and Japuji. Whenever he traveled to North India his last destination was Amritsar and he stayed there for a considerable period of time and visited the Golden Temple every day. His biographer Narayan Chaudhari recorded: "Devendranath stayed in Amritsar for two months [in the early months of the year 1857]. He used to go to the Golden Temple every day and participate in the prayers of the Sikh devotees assembled there. The Sikh found in him an ardent admirer of Guru Nanak and of his hymns of Japuji and liked him; he also in his turn loved to mix with the Sikhs for their steadfast devotion to their religion."

Devendranath again went to Amritsar in 1873 along with his son Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who was then a boy of age less than 12. The son has left his account in his Reminiscences: "The Golden Temple of Amritsar comes back to me like a dream. Many a morning have I accompanied my father to this Gurudarbar of the Sikhs in the middle of the Lake? There the sacred chanting resounds continually. My father, seated amidst the throng of worshippers, would sometimes add his voice to the hymn of praise, and finding a stranger joining in their devotions they would wax enthusiastically cordial, and we would return loaded with the sanctified offerings of sugar crystals and other sweets.

"One day my father invited one of the chanting choirs to our place and got him to sing us some of their sacred songs. The man went away probably more than satisfied with the reward he received."

The Sikh Dharma left deep impression on both Devendranath and Rabindranath Tagore. In 1896, Rabindranath composed his Arti (devotional song) 'Tahare Arti kare chandratapan dev manav vande saran' in Raga Madhmand Sarang on the line of Nanakdev's Arti 'Gaganme thalu ravichand dipak bane, tarikamandal janak moti'. I do not have the English rendering of Tagore's song but I do have that of Nanakdev and I give it below.

The firmament is thy salver,  
The sun and the moon thy lamps;  
The galaxies of stars are pearls scattered,  
The woods of sandal are thine incense.  
The breezes blow thy royal fan;  
The flowers of the forests,  
Lie as offerings at thy feet.  
What wonderful worship with lamps is this?  
O Thou destroyer of fear!

Unstuck Music is the sound of thy temple drums.  
 Thousands are thine eyes,  
 And yet thou hast no eyes;  
 Thousands are thy shapes,  
 And yet thou hast no shape;  
 Thousands are thy pure feet,  
 And yet thou hast not one foot;  
 Thousands are thy noses,  
 And yet thou hast no nose.  
 All this is thy play and bewitches me.  
 In every heart there is light:  
 That light art Thou.  
 By the Light that is of God himself  
 Is every soul illumined?  
 But this divine Light becomes manifest  
 Only by the Guru's teachings.  
 What is pleasing to thee, O Lord  
 Is the best Arti: worship with lamps.  
 O Lord, my mind yearns for thy lotus feet,  
 As the honey-bee for the nectar of the flowers.  
 Night and day Lord, I am athirst for thee,  
 Give water of thy mercy to Nanak:  
 He is like the Sarang: the hawk-cuckoo that drinks only rain drops  
 So that he may dwell over in the peace of thy name.

## JAPUJI AND VINOBA BHAVE

Vinoba Bhave liked Japuji so much that he has written a commentary on it. He was impressed by its first mantra and taken note of Nirbhao and Nirvair, whose meaning he already saw earlier. To this he added, from Japuji, Nanak's line 'mane mangu na chale panthu', whose meaning he gave as under: Under the spell of contemplation a man does not walk on the path of any panth (an organization with fixed ideology). He also explained one more relevant line from Japuji: 'aeee panthi sagal jamati, mani jitai jagu jitu'. He gave its meaning as follows: Ours is also 'aeee' panth, that is, whoever comes in it, and he is ours. Whole universe, whole humanity is our community. If we desire to win the world then the path is to win our mind.

Vinoba has classified his commentary on Japuji as under: There are in all 40 collections of verses including the first basic mantra, 38 groups of verses (paudi) and the lone concluding sloka (stanzas). The first seven groups of verses make the first division. The next twelve groups of verses make the second division and the other eight groups of verses make the third division. The remaining eleven groups of verses make the fourth division. He named the first division Manglacharan; the second Sravan-Manan-Nididhyasan; the third Bhagvad Mahima and the fourth Sadhna. These headings give the idea what Japuji contains. It is not my intention to write here a commentary upon Vinoba's commentary but I quote here a few favorite stanzas of his.

- Adi Sachu Jugadi Sachu. Hai Bhi Sachu Nanak Hosi Bhi Sachu. (He was true before; he is true today and Nanak says he will remain true henceforth).
- So Daru Keha So Gharu Keha Jitu Bahi Sarab Samale;  
Baje Nad Anek Asankha Kete Vavanhare.  
(How is Your (God) royal court and house, sitting there you taking care of the whole world? There rings innumerable and many divine sounds (Nad) how am I to distinguish?).
- Jo Tisu Bhavai Soi Karsi Hukamu Na Karna Jai;  
So Patisahu Saha Patisahibu Nanak Rahanu Rajai.  
(Whatever He (God) likes he will do. On him no one's order will work He is Emperor of emperors, Nanak says, according to his permission or wishes everyone has to live).

## LEGENDS

I give below only two legends because it does not add anything to Nanakdev's greatness. These legends are well-known.

- When Nanakdev went to Mecca, he slept in such a way that his feet were pointing towards Kaaba. A Muslim attendant woke him up and asked him not to point his feet towards God. Nanak said: "Please show me where I point my legs." He showed one direction but then Kaaba shifted in that direction. The attendant was stunned and he walked away.
- Once Nanakdev camped with his companions near a mountain. A little above them lived a Muslim cleric. He had a well from which people used to draw water. When he saw that people flocked around Nanakdev to hear his sermons, he refused the people to draw water from his well. Nanakdev sent Mardana to placate the clergy but Mardana returned without any success. Then Nanakdev asked the people to dig a well near his residence. Ample water came out in the well. The cleric became angry and rolled a big boulder from his height to crush Nanakdev and the people gathered around him. Nanakdev simply raised his hand and the boulder stopped on the way. The cleric was stunned and he fell at the feet of Nanakdev.

### **NANAKDEV'S BHAJANS**

Guru Nanakdev and the gurus who followed him wrote bhajans in the name of Nanak to show their respect to him. Hence for outsiders, who are not conversant with Guru Granth Sahib, it is difficult to know which bhajan is of Nanak or of other gurus. For instance, Guru Arjandev wrote this bhajan:

Truth, when nothing else was;  
 Truth, when process of Time starts;  
 Truth, what the present sustains;  
 Truth, O Nanak shall ever remain. (Raga Gauri, Sukhmani, 17, p. 258)

Now let us see a bhajan from Guru Tegh Bahadur:

Kahe Re Ban Khojan Jae (Raga Dhanasri: Hymn I)

Why wander about in jungles in search of Lord?  
 He is all pervading, un-smear'd and eternally with you  
 Very like the fragrance in the flower, the image in the mirror, He resides in us.  
 He alone is—outside and inside  
 Says Nanak the delusion dissolves, when we seek him within.

To any listener, the above two bhajans will appear as that of Nanak whereas they are not. Now I give below a bhajan of Nanak keeping the above fact in mind. It is: 'Hari Bina Tero Kon Sahai'. Leena Mukherji has rendered this bhajan. The music is by Robin Ray and the record number is HMV N 20148. I do not know how to translate it but I give below a gist.

Without Hari (God) who is there to help you?  
 Is it mother and father, son and wife? No, none.  
 Thinking that wealth, land and all estates are yours,  
 None will go with you when you die. They will remain where it is.  
 If you do not increase your liking for the Lord—  
 He is ever a friend of poor and redeemer of his sorrows.  
 Nanak says this world is mere illusion like a night dream.

### **NANAK'S CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION**

Nanak's cultural contribution was immense. Before the partition of India Guru Granth Sahib was read in many homes in the western part of India. It was read not only in the Sikh homes but also in many Hindu homes. Many Sindhi Hindus are even today Nanak Panthi. It is a tragedy that Nankanasahab is not with these devotees and they need a visa to visit their most cherished sacred shrine. Today a visit to the Golden Temple in Amritsar gives a glimpse of what Nanak did for India. He introduced a custom of 'langar' to dine together where high and low or rich and poor sat in one row forgetting their class and caste. He served food free to all to establish the brotherhood of humankind. He left a legacy that the latter Gurus kept alive for 240 years. We now turn to the House of Gurus:

1. Guru Nanakdev (the first Guru) 1469-1539 (lifetime: 70 years).
2. Guru Angad (Second Guru) 1504-1552 (lifetime: 48 years). Disciple of Guru Nanak. Guru-ship: 1539-1552 (13 years).
3. Guru Amardas (Third Guru) 1479-1574 (lifetime: 95 years). Disciple of Guru Angad. Guru-ship: 1552-1574 (22 years).
4. Guru Ramdas (Fourth Guru) 1534-1581 (lifetime: 47 years). He was an orphan, 11 years old, named Bhai Jetha, who took shelter under Guru Amardas and became his most devoted disciple. Son-in-law of Guru Amardas, he was named Ramdas. Guru-ship: 1574-1581 (7 years).
5. Guru Arjandev (Fifth Guru) 1563-1606 (lifetime: 43 years). Son of Guru Ramdas. Guru-ship: 1581-1606 (25 years).
6. Guru Hargobind (Sixth Guru): 1595-1644 (lifetime: 49 years). Son of Guru Arjandev. Guru-ship: 1606-1644 (38 years).
7. Guru Hari Rai (Seventh Guru): 1630-1661 (lifetime: 31 years). Grandson of Guru Hargobind. Guru-ship: 1644-1661 (17 years).
8. Guru Hari Krishan (Eight Guru): 1656-1664 (lifetime: 8 years). Son of Guru Hari Rai. Guru-ship: 1661-1664 (3 years).
9. Guru Tegh Bahadur (Ninth Guru): 1621-1675 (lifetime: 54 years). Son of Guru Hargobind. Guru-ship: 1664-1675 (11 years).
10. Guru Gobind Singh (Tenth Guru): 1666-1708 (lifetime: 42 years). Son of Guru Tegh Bahadur. Guru-ship: 1675-1708 (33 years).

These were the ten Gurus of Sikh, who kept Nanak's legacy and the Sikh Dharma alive. Up to the fifth Guru, the Gurus were entirely devoted to their Dharma and had nothing to do with politics of the day. The Mogul emperor Jehangir's son, Khusro, took free meal in a 'langar' and that cost or took Guru Arjandev's life. Nanak's 'langar' was for the brotherhood of men but Jehangir converted it into enmity. Now politics entered into the Sikh Dharma as a dire necessity. This history is controversial as all Indian histories are. I do not want to enter into these muddy waters and I would like to quote the biographers of some of these Gurus. I am just stringing their lines and not quoting their paragraphs and using inverted commas, which cannot be justified within the customary rules of writing. I begin with Dr. Wazir Singh, the biographer of Guru Arjandev.

"Guru Nanak had not inherited spirituality from his parents; his philosophic genius was gradually discovered by people closest to him. Guru Nanak drew outlines of Sikh institutions all by himself and created an atmosphere of spiritual development. Bhai Lehina fortunately came in contact with Guru Nanak and his dedication got fully rewarded on account of such uplifting atmosphere. As Guru Angad, he kept the heritage of Nanak-path fully alive, making it truly dynamic. Guru Amar Das the third Guru earned the Guru's mantel by dint of his dedication and self-surrender; his mature old age and fully developed personality gave the Sikh institution a rocklike solid base, established the custom of preserving the sacred Word, projected manifold plans for the future and brought out the potentialities for all-round growth. An orphaned eleven-year-old child, in the form of Bhai Jetha, who took shelter with him, not only entered his family, but on the basis of merit became the inheritor of the gurugaddi. The holy environs of the Guru family thus created by Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das, together with the entire Nanak tradition, formed the promising backdrop to Guru Arjan's great and memorable accomplishments."

**Guru Arjandev:** "Guru Arjan in his lifetime nourished Sikhism in full measure. He furnished the Sikh community with an organized form, turned it into a community of cultured individuals whose members were gentle and contended beings. ... It was in his youth that the planning got initiated; schemes started to be thought out and formulated. The construction of water-pools and mansions, establishment of the Harimandir [the Golden Temple], editing and installation of the Adi-Granth volume, the gift of a religious capital (Amritsar) to the Sikh society; establishment of new townships, augmentation of economic resources for the fulfillment of the on going projects, and management of the community organization—such are some of the important steps that he took during his lifetime. In addition, he also paid attention to the emotive and the artistic development of the Sikh circles; the ability to enjoy the poetic art and music through the collective singing of the Bani ... and the highway to spiritual emancipation was carved out. ... He encouraged his followers in the acquisition of skills like horse-riding and wielding of weapons. Heroic individuals like Bhai Bidhi Chand were among the disciples of Guru Arjan ... The Guru-father had arranged for the young Hargobind to

acquire instruction both in the shastra (sacred lore) and shastar (weaponary), under the supervision of the revered Baba Buddha.”

In short, Guru Arjandev’s main contributions were the editing and compilation of the first recension of Granth Sahib, the supervision in the construction of the Golden Temple and his poetic and musical work Sukhmani. Why was such a man tortured and executed we see now?

Jehangir, in “his autobiography in Persian, *Tuzak-i-Jehangiri*, throws light in clear terms and his intentions. He writes that the Hindu Arjan, who resides on the banks of Beas at Goindval, is misleading innocent Hindus as well as some foolish Muslims, in the garb of a ‘pir’ and ‘sheikh’ ... ‘I have been thinking for long to close this centre of falsehood, or else bring him into the fold of Islam’.” “Jehangir got an opportunity to initiate action against the Guru when he came to know that Guru Arjan had provided shelter to his revolting son, Khusro. The reports reaching him, perhaps, may not have been entirely correct but Jehangir took the decision: ‘I ordered that he should be brought into my presence and having handed over his belongings and children to Murtaza Khan, and having confiscated his property, I ordered that he should be put to death in accordance with *styasat* and *yasa*’.”

Jehangir issued the order on May 23, 1606. Guru Arjan handed over his charge to his son, Hargobind, on May 25<sup>th</sup> and he was arrested on May 26<sup>th</sup> and was tortured and killed on May 30<sup>th</sup>. Jehangir kept Hargobind in prison for 10 years.

Jehangir sowed the seeds of enmity between Sikhs and the State. We now pass on to Mohindar Pal Kohli, the biographer of Guru Tegh Bahadur.

**Guru Tegh Bahadur:** “He was an obedient son, and loved his father deeply. He would sit near his father Guru Hargobind always ready to serve him ... When Guru Hargobind seated his grandson, Har Rai, on the pontific throne ... and asked his sons to acknowledge him as Guru, Tegh Bahadur was the first to do so. He was an affectionate brother, a devoted husband and loving father ... In the Battle of Kartarpur, when only fourteen years of age he fought valiantly in the army of his father to the admiration of all the participants. A study of his moving *sabadas* composed in various Ragas and Raginis, incorporated in the *Adi Granth*, reveals him as a great musician ... For nearly twelve years subsequent to the death of Guru Hargobind ... he chose to live in silence at Bakala ... If anything was offered to him, he readily gave it away to the needy ... He traveled from village to village as far as Assam in the east, inculcating the spirit of self-help among the rural masses by leading them with pick and shovel in digging wells and cleansing stinking environment.”

From the above presentation of his biographer we find “Guru Tegh Bahadur was a saint, a religious celebrity of outstanding spiritual attainment.” ... “The Guru-ship came to him unsolicited. When after his installation he went to Amritsar to pay his obeisance to the memory of the earlier Gurus ... he was not permitted access to Harmandar (Golden Temple) ... he returned from the place quite unruffled with the usual poise ... When some of his followers recovered the original *Adi Granth* ... from the wrongful possession of Dhir Mal, he directed them to restore to the [possessor]. This equanimity and detachment unquestionably puts him in the category of saints in the true sense of the term ... The Guru was free from the evils of ego, animosity and anger. Throughout his life he practiced the cardinal virtues of piety, forgiveness and humility, which have characterized [all] saints.”

Guru Tegh Bahadur settled down at Anandpur. During this period, on 9 April 1669, Aurangzeb issued an order to demolish all schools and temples of infidels and then propagate Islam. Among many temples, “the Keshav Rai temple of Mathura, that ‘wonder of the age’, which a Bundela chief had built at a lavish cost of [rupees] 22 lakhs” was demolished. And the terror was on.

“May 25, 1675. Place: Chak Nanaki (Anandpur Sahib—now in District Ropar of the Punjab). A spiritual congregation was on. The people were listening spell bound; to melodious hymns of Sri Guru Granth Sahib ... All of a sudden there was uproar. A group of sixteen Kashmiri Brahmins led by one Kirpa Ram suddenly entered the congregation and said with folded hands: “Sire, the Viceroy of Kashmir Iftikhar Khan, has let loose untold misery upon the people belonging to religions other than Islam. Under his fanatical rule forcible conversions are being carried out and helpless people are perpetually in danger of losing their lives and

Dharma.” The [saint’s] ... countenance became serious and he fell silent. Eventually he said, “To get rid of this distress a truly virtuous person should present himself for sacrifice.” “None could be worthier than [you], father dear, for such noble act, uttered the [nine] year lad.” The [saint] was Guru Tegh Bahadur ... the boy was his son Gobind Das ...”

“Guru Tegh Bahadur took the suggestion, rather a divine hint, from his son. He was much pleased and turning to the Kashmiris asked them ... go to Delhi and represent to the Emperor that if he could convert Guru Tegh Bahadur, all people, including themselves, would willingly embrace Islam.” The Kashmiris did what they were told and authorities were happy to arrest the Guru.

The Guru “prepared himself for the ordeal. He installed his son ... on the Gaddi of Nanak ... he began his journey to Delhi with three of his devoted Sikhs ... Hardly had he reached Malakpur, situated between Kiratpur and Ropar ... he was arrested along with his companions by Nur Muhammad Khan Mirza of Ropar Police ... on 12 July 1675 and taken to Delhi via Sirhind.” First his companions were brutally murdered in his presence. Still he was not shaken. He was repeatedly asked to embrace Islam to save himself but he did not submit. He maintained his ‘perfect equanimity’ and said: “I do not frighten anyone nor do I fear anyone. For death I am prepared and I cheerfully accept it.” On 11 November 1675, he was executed ‘at a place where now stands Gurudwara Sis-Ganj in Chandni Chouk, Delhi’. His son, Gobind Das said: “Sis diya par sirare na diya (he gave his head not his faith).” Now we see what his son, Gobind Das, did.

**Guru Gobind Singh:** Gobind Das was a worthy son of a worthy father. His saintly father Guru Tegh Bahadur and his mother Gujaridevi had trained him well. He was a poet, a man of literature, an able administrator and a great saintly warrior. I have used the word saintly warrior because he, in his life, never robbed an individual nor did he raid any village. He never destroyed any mosque nor did he capture his enemy and imprison him. He never forced anyone to adopt his Sikh religion. He fought bravely all his life in the defense of his fellow brothers and for his Sikh Dharma (religion). These facts are recorded by historians and he is praised for his singular nobility. He was born on 22 December 1666 in Patna (Bihar) and died, at the age of 42, on 7 October 1708 in Nanded (Maharashtra). He lived during his life in Anandpur and Pavta or Panvata. He built the forts of Anandgadh, Lohgadh, Fatehgadh and Fulgadh. He trained all his populace—peasants, traders or of any other professions—as soldiers. He asked his people that a man should suffix his name with Singh (Lion) and a woman with Kaur (Lioness). He himself changed his name from Gobind Das to Gobind Singh. He said to his fighters: “Chidyo Se Me Baj Tudau, Sava Lakh Se Ak Ladau, Bhup Gariboka Kahevau, Tab Gobind Singh Nam Kahau (I should be called Gobind Singh only if I make sparrows kill a hawk, a single man face and fight 125, 000 and the poor call me their King).” This way he instilled into his followers self-confidence. For solidarity of his men he asked them to wear five symbols: Kesh—uncut and unshaven hair; Kangha—comb; Kachchha—short breeches; Kara—steel bracelet and Kirpan—sword. “He baptized his followers into Khalsa through a hollowed ceremony known as ‘Khande da Pahul’ coupled with a series of pledges of total surrender to the supreme will of the community.” In this way an army of liberators, known as the Khalsa, came into being and its sacrifices became legendary.

In all Gobind Singh fought fourteen battles, mainly with the Moghul army and the Nawabs of Lahore and Sirhind. Among these, the battles of Bhangani, Chamkaur, Anandpur and Muktasar are famous. In the battle of Chamkaur he lost his two sons, Ajit Singh (19) and Joravar Singh (14). Also, his two other younger sons, Juzar Singh and Fateh Singh were captured and the Nawab of Sirhind got them embedded in the wall and killed them. On hearing the news Gobind Singh said: “Four had died, what has happened. There are some thousands alive.” (char mua to kya hua, jivit kai hajar).

Gobind Singh was not only a warrior but also a very learned man. In his royal court there were 51 poets. He wrote more than a dozen books. Among these is his Ramayan (Ram-avatar), which he specifically wrote for his followers to imbibe the virtues of the fighters like Ram’s sons Lav and Kush. Baljit Tulsī, one of the admirers of Ramavatar, wrote: “Ramavatar was written in 864 cantos and 71 types of meters (Chhanda). The meters used are rare, marvelous and admirable. All the Rasas used in the poetic diction have been effectively and remarkably used at proper places.”

Just before his death he abolished the Guru-ship. He said: "Akal ordained me so I directed the fold. Now I ordain you all Sikhs to consider Granth as Guru (Agnā Bhai Akal Ki Tabhi Chalao Panth, Sab Sikhān Ko Hukam He, Guru Maniā Granth)." This way Guru Granth Sahib came to be regarded as Guru for all time to come. The final recension of Guru Granth Sahib was done under the direction of Guru Gobind Singh himself. He included in it 57 slokas and 59 bhajans in 15 Ragas of his father.

### **GURU GRANTH SAHIB**

It consists of the compositions of six Gurus, 'writings of 15 saint-bhaktas, 11 bhakt-poets and 4 of the devotees and minstrels of the Guru family.' The saint-bhaktas are: Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Ramanand, Jaidev, Trolchan, Dhanna, Sain, Pipa, Bhikhan, Sadhna, Parmanand, Surdas, Beni and Seikh Farid.

In writing these biographies I have relied on the authors whose names I have already included in the text. I have consulted many articles to make the text as authentic as possible. For instance Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "For a political offence Jehangir had Arjan Singh tortured to death ... The unjust and cruel treatment of their guru filled them with resentment and turned their minds to arms. Under their sixth guru, Hargovind, they became a military brotherhood ... Guru Hargovind himself was imprisoned for ten years by Jehangir. The ninth guru was Tegh Bahadur ... He was ordered by Aurangzeb to embrace Islam, and on his refusal, he was executed ... the last guru was Govind Singh. He made the Sikhs into a powerful military community ..." This sequence and the facts are reflected in my text. And I hope my presentation is as authentic as possible.

## CHAPTER 7



**Area: 222236 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 10,143,700 (H: % / M: 67.0 %) / Source: 2001 Census.**

### LALLESHWARI (1335-1387)

Lalleshwari (Lal Ded or mother Lal) was a great mystic saint of Kashmir. She was born during the reign of Maharaja Udayamadev (1323-1338) of Kashmir. After his death, the Queen Kota Rani (1338-1339), the widow of Udayamadev, ruled the kingdom for a while. However, Shah Mir deposed her soon and established a firm Muslim Rule in Kashmir around 1340. Lal grew up during this disturbed period. In fact, we know very little about her life. Her works have kept her name alive in the heart of Kashmiris. Whatever little we know about her is from the tributes the later day saint paid to her. The recent biographers too have discovered some facts of her life. We read what her recent biographer has to say about her. Jayalal Kaul wrote: "... She has been not only the most famous poet saint of Kashmir but the maker of Kashmir poetry." Her spiritual personality is presented in the writings of the later day saints like Pandit Parmanand and Sheikh Noor-ud-din Vali (Nund Rishi). To Parmanand, Lal was a perfect Shaiva Yogini. He wrote: "Unique in her yoga dvadashanta mandala: Realizing anhata nada, bindu and Om, Lalleshwari attained the Supreme Anand. Lalla merged her prana in the Transcendent void. While ostensibly she went to bathe at the shrine: At Shurahyar ghat, with a leap and bound: She jumped across this world to where: There is none but God." Nund Rishi wrote: "The Lalla of Padamanpur: Who had drunk nectar: She is the Avtar and Yogini: O God, bestow the same spiritual power on me." These writings only give us some idea of Lalleshwari's spiritual attainments.

### BIODATA

Name: Lalleshwari

Birth Place: Pandrethan, a small village some 6 km from Srinagar

Birth date: controversial. Sometime in 1335 (according to Prof. J. L. Kaul)

Mother's name: not known to me

Father's name: not known to me

School: She was educated at home by the family priest Sidhu Mol (Sidh Srikanth)

Works: Vakh (verses)

Death Place: Vejibror (Vrajvihar) on the high way to Jammu, some 45 km from Kashmir

Death date: sometime in 1387 (controversial): some say she died at the age of 71

### LIFE

We know nothing about Lalleshwari's childhood. She was married at the age of 14. Her husband was Nica Bhatt. She was named Padmavati in her husband's house because that was the custom among the Brahmins of Kashmir. They lived at Pampore some 13 km

from Srinagar. She was not treated well in her husband's house. Her mother-in-law starved her. Her husband and her father-in-law did nothing to feed her properly. It was impossible to survive on starvation diet in a cold country like Kashmir. Laleshwari decided to quit the home and moved out on to the street. She roamed naked on the streets and ate what people gave to her. Then she took to the ascetic life and perfected herself as a Yogini. There is nothing much we can say about her. She has expressed her life in her verses and we quote a few of them below under vakh.

## **VAKH**

"My Guru gave me but one precept: "From without withdraw your gaze within ... And fix it on the inmost Self." Taking to heart this one precept: Naked I began to roam." This explains why she moved naked.

"Let them mock at me and call me names. If a true devotee of Siva I were, I shall not feel distressed or hurt. Can ashes leave a stain on a mirror?" This explains her life on streets and her resolve to face it.

"Every moment I taught Omkar to my mind. I was myself reading: And myself hearing. From So'ham (I am He) I cut of aham (I am). Then did I, Lalla: Reach the place of illumination." This shows Sankara's influence in Kashmir.

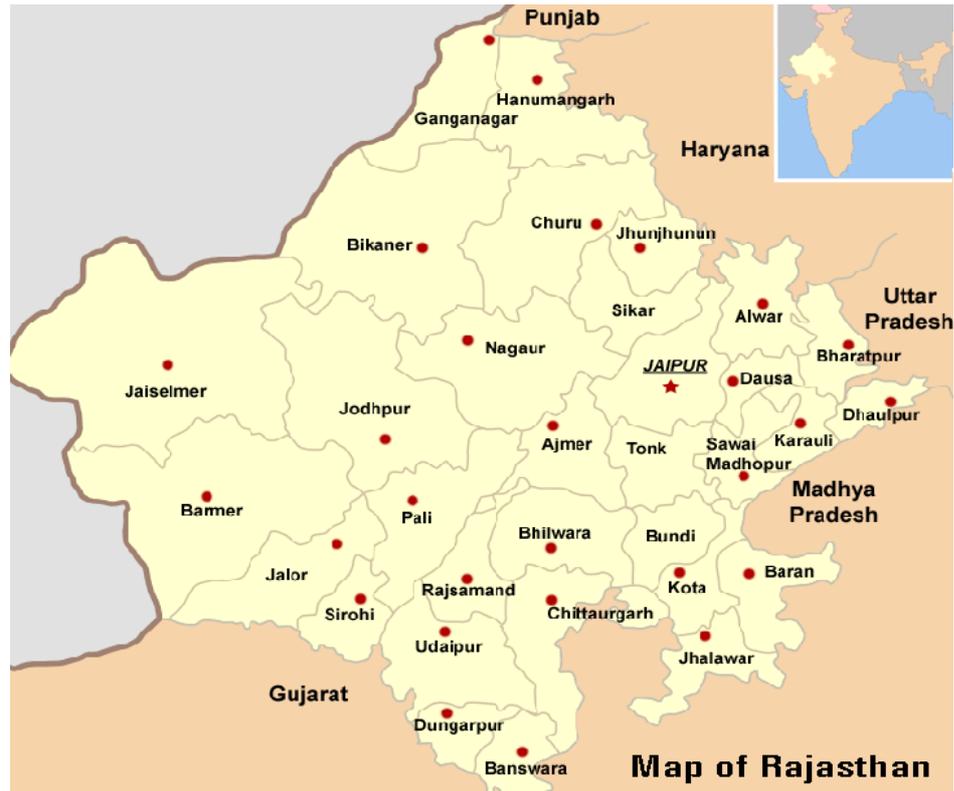
"He who regards himself and others alike: He who regards alike both day and night: He whose mind is free from duality—He alone hath seen the God of gods." This sums up her philosophy.

In 1914, Pandit Makand Ram Shastri collected for the first time the sayings of Lal Ded from the oral rendering of Dharamdas Darvesh of Handwara. He gave this collection to George Grierson who published it as Vakyani in 1920. Later, Richard Temple, Anand Kaul Bamzai, J. L. Kaul and B. N. Parimu have published Lal Ded's vakh. The above quotes are from a magazine called Manushi. We continue with Manushi. "There is no monument of any kind where her body is supposed to have been cremated or buried, nor is there any shrine set up for her anywhere in Kashmir. She lives only in her vakh: "Engrave on the tablet of your heart: The words that Lalla spoke." ... Lalla is placed first in time amongst modern Kashmiri poets and is considered the maker of modern Kashmiri language and literature. She remains unsurpassed in the vakh or verse saying genre. ... She adapted Sanskrit forms of words to the use of Kashmiri, coining new words in the process. ... The vakh is a four-line stanza, complete in itself, a gnomic verse. They can be sung but are not meant to be sung like the songs ... They are not musical. They are more like Upanishadic verses than the songs. ... Lalla nowhere uses erotic imaginary or bridal mysticism. ... The vakh are aphoristic, even cryptic. ... Her poetry pervades the countryside even today. ... Kashmiri poets and mystics, both Hindu and Muslim, have paid tribute to her in their writings over the centuries."

## **VINOBA'S COMMENTS ON LALLA**

Some 600 years ago a great woman named Lalla was born. She was a Shivite Hindu woman. She wrote verses full of piety, which all sing even today lovingly. Her 'prabhav' (impression) is on all because she was a perfect devotee. Her verses are translated into English. She is much loved in Kashmir.

## CHAPTER 8



Area: 342236 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: (H: % / M: %) / Source: 2001 Census.

### MIRABAI (1498-1546)

Among the saints of India, Mira's life is unique. She was a princess of Medta and queen to be of Mewad. She renounced her royal life and chose to live a mendicant's life. Is this not unique? She reminds us of Buddha and Mahavir who too were royal personages but chose to become mendicants. She sits in the company of Buddha and Mahavir with a difference. Buddha founded the Buddha Dharma and Mahavir founded the Jain Dharma. Mira did not find any new Dharma but found a place in the hearts of her people through her divine bhajans. Her poems or bhajans; written in her Rajasthani; have found place in the literature of Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Udia and Gujarati. The structure and musicality of the bhajans are such that they could fit in any of the above languages. Her bhajans, even today, are heard all over India.

Like Buddha, Mirabai's personality is also unique. Her biographers are simply lost in ecstasies while collecting material on her life and write fantasies about her. Many biographers have written on Mira's life. These biographers differ so much from one another that it is impossible to write an authentic sketch of Mirabai's life. While writing this biography, I feel that it is sheer madness to attempt to write anything on Mirabai. It is almost an impossible task. We write here on her because she cannot be omitted from the list of India's saints. She occupies a prominent place among them. Her serene pure life touches the core of one's being and she simply cannot be omitted. We begin with her bio data.

### BIODATA

Name: Mihirabai (Mirabai is a short form of it.)

Birth Place: Kudki, Medta, Chaukari (Acharya). Simply, a place in the Nagor District in the present day Rajasthan

Birth date: sometime in the years 1496 (Thakur), 1498 (Manusi), 1499 (Zaveri), and 1504 (Acharya)

Mother's name: Virkunwari

Father's name: Ratan Singh Rathod

School: being a princess, she was highly educated at home.

Works: Her highly musical bhajans

Death Place: not known (Nabhadas, circa 1600 AD, did not tell us about Mira's visit to Dwarka or her disappearance in the idol of the temple of Dwarka. Nabhadas was perhaps the earliest author to write about Mira.)

Death date: 1546 (Most authors agree on this year but those who do not agree on this year tell us 1570 as her death date.)

## LIFE

All biographers of Mirabai rely on the circumstantial evidences in constructing her life. Keeping this fact in mind, we proceed further. Mirabai herself wrote: "Medtia ghar janam liyo hai; Mira nam kahayo," (I was born in the house of Medtiyas and was named Mira) and "ras puno janmiya ri, Radhaka avtar" (being born on the 'ras puno' day, I am an incarnation of Radha). If these lines are not forgery, then we are certain that Mira was a Medtiya Rathod and she was born on the Sharad Purnima day, that is sometime in October. We do not know the year or the names of her parents. This leads us to examine the House of Medtiyas.

Rao Jodhaji Rathod founded the famous city of Jodhpur in Rajasthan in 1458. He had 14 sons. His fourth son, Rao Dudaji, established an independent kingdom in Medta in about 1462. His children came to be known as Medtiya Rathods. Rao Dudaji had five sons: Viramdev, Raisal, Panchayan, Ratan Singh and Raimal. Rao Dudaji had given to his son, Ratan Singh, 12 villages for administration—administrative office being in Kudki. Kudki was 30 km away from Medta. Scholars have identified Ratan Singh and his wife Virkunwari, the daughter of Surtan Singh of Zalawar as Mira's parents. How they arrived at this conclusion, we do not know. The parents partly lived in Kudki and partly in Medta. Rao Dudaji died in 1515 and ruled his kingdom for 53 years. After his death, Viramdev succeeded him. Viramdev lost Medta in 1538 when Maldeo Rathod of Jodhpur annexed it. Viramdev could rule over his kingdom for only 23 years. This way the kingdom of Medta lasted for some 76 (1462-1538) years.

We continue now with Mira's life. Mira was born in Kudki or Medta around 1500 AD. She was named Mihirabai because she was as bright as Sun. Mihir is a common name among Rajputs and Mihira is the feminine form of it. Mira lived in Kudki or Medta. Most probably, she lived more in Medta because her grandfather Dudaji was very fond of her as most of the grandfathers are very fond of their grandchildren. Dudaji was a Krishna bhakt (devotee) and Mira followed him. We do not know much about Mira's childhood. Dudaji died in 1515 and Mira was around 15 years old then. The next year, in 1516, Mira was married in the Rana family of Chitod. This point is not disputed because the word Ranaji occurs so many times in her bhajans. Besides, it was easy for Viramdev to arrange Mira's marriage in the Rana family of Chitod because Viramdev's wife was the sister of Rana Sanga. We have given a brief genealogy of Ranas a little later. Here we look at Rana Sanga's family.

Rana Sanga had seven sons: Puranmal, Bhojraj, Parbat Singh, Ratan Singh, Vikramaditya, Krishna Singh and Uday Singh. Of these, Puranmal, Bhojraj, Parbat Singh and Krishna Singh had died during the lifetime of Rana Sanga. Puranmal had died earlier than Bhojraj; hence, scholars have identified Bhojraj as the husband of Mira.

Mira was married at a very young age. She would be around 16. Her husband died in 1523 or earlier. That is, her husband lived at the most 7 years after their marriage. Besides, Rana Sanga had to fight with his neighbors all the time to keep his independence. Naturally, his sons too were accompanying the father in the battles. This shows that Mirabai was living during the most disturbed period of Indian history. How much Mirabai lived in her natal home and how much she lived in her marital home after her marriage no one knows? When she started her unusual life of mixing with bhaktas, we do not know. Was she singing and dancing in public before her marriage? If so, the Ranas would have known that and they could not have objected to it later. The crucial point is when Mira began her outdoor life. We do not know. We have no idea of Mira's married life.

After the death of Mira's husband in or before 1523, Rana Sanga was occupied with warfare. Babar defeated Lodi, the ruler of Delhi in 1526 and occupied a part of India. Rana Sanga wanted to drive out Babar and the battle of Kanwah took place in 1527. Mira's father

Ratan Singh died in this battle and Rana Sanga was wounded fatally. Rana Sanga died sometime between 1527 and 1529. Did these events not affect Mirabai? Who would answer?

Mirabai saw several deaths between the years 1515 and 1527. The first she saw the death of her grandfather in 1515, the next she saw the death of her mother after her marriage. Some say her mother died before her marriage. After her marriage, her husband died in 1523. Now in 1527 and after, her father and father-in-law died. She saw in all five deaths of near ones in just over a decade. Any human being would be shattered and these events certainly affected Mirabai. Except Viramdev, her uncle, she had no relative left. She had to go now alone. Perhaps, her troubles began due to the family intrigues in the Rana Sanga family after his death. We look into it now.

In Rana Sanga's family, two groups were fighting with each other. The queen Karnavati, the daughter of Hada Rao Narvad and his brother Surajmal formed the one group. The queen Dhanbai, the daughter of Rathod Rao Sujavat and her son Ratan Singh formed the other group. Mirabai had nothing to do with any of these groups but she being Rathod, Karnavati harbored some grudge against her. Karnavati, her daughter Uda and her son Vikramaditya harassed Mirabai and legends are circulated involving these three.

After the death of Rana Sanga, Ratan Singh succeeded him. He ruled for a while but in a fight between him and Surajmal, both were fatally wounded and died. Vikramaditya came to the throne at the age of 14. Now he, his mother and his sister troubled Mirabai much. There is no point in going over these incidents because these are much publicized and known to all. What is important to note is that Viramdev, Mira's uncle, came to know of Mira's troubles and he invited her to Medta. Mirabai left Chitod and moved to Medta; perhaps late in 1533 or in the beginning of 1534. Soon after that, Bahadur Shah of Gujarat attacked Chitod in 1534 and ruined it. Fortunately, he could not annex Chitod because he had to rush back home to save his Gujarat from the attack of Humayun. Vikramaditya regained his throne and ruled Chitod for a while. However, his cousin Banveer soon killed him in 1536 at a very young age of 19. Earlier, his mother Karnavati and the sister Uda had died during the jauhar (community self-immolation among Rajputs). This way, tormentors of Mirabai were eliminated due to the sad circumstances within a few years after her departure.

When Mirabai reached her home, she realized the difficulties in which her uncle was placed. She might have heard of it but might not have realized its gravity. Maldeo Rathod of Jodhpur wanted all Rathod territory under his rule. Viramdev wanted to avoid bloodshed among the brothers. This was his difficulty. In 1536, Maldeo wrote to Viramdev: "Medta is yours, but in the house, I am the tikayat, you are my bhai-bandh chakar." In short, Maldeo wanted to tell Viramdev and his family, which included Mirabai that the family was of just brotherly servants. This obviously hurt the pride of the self-respecting family. In 1538, Viramdev left Medta for Ajmer and his saintly niece Mira accompanied him to share his distress. Viramdev had to leave Ajmer too within a year for some unspecified destination and he moved out without informing his family. Viramdev went to Ranthambor, Malva and other places with which we are not concerned here.

Mirabai was now left to herself. She decided to live a wandering life with her devoted companion Lalita. They left Ajmer for Vrindavan visiting various pilgrim places on the way. Vrindavan was developing into a great pilgrim centre during her lifetime. Madhvendra Puri, tutor of Vallabha, had found an idol from the ruins of Giriraj near Vrindavan. The followers of Pusti Marg built a temple in Giriraj and Vallabhacharya installed the discovered idol in the temple in 1520. Sanatan Goswami, disciple of Chaitanya, found an idol of Madangopal from Aditya Tilla in 1533, built the temple of Madanmohan in Vrindavan, and installed the discovered idol. Later, in 1534, Rup Goswami, another disciple of Chaitanya, found an idol from Goma Tilla, built the temple of Govindji and installed his discovered idol. All these temples had become renowned by the time Mirabai and Lalita arrived in Vrindavan around 1540. Mirabai paid a tribute to Madanmohan in one of her bhajans and to Govindji in one another bhajan. She also met Jiv Goswami, who was not willing to meet her but she rebuked him by telling him that there was only one man in Vrindavan and not two. Goswami understood the rebuke, came down to meet her, touched her feet, and received her warmly. This shows that Mirabai lived in Vrindavan for quite a time.

In Vrindavan, there were many Sampraday but Mirabai did not take shelter in any one of them. Her way of life was not acceptable not only among the Rajput communities but also among various Vaishnav communities. Mirabai had true Rajput blood. She won't surrender to the temple authorities when she had the courage to stand against the might of Rajput warriors. She went on singing and dancing in public her bhajans among devotees without caring for their position or rank.

How long Mirabai lived in Vrindavan, we do not know. If she left Vrindavan, where she went, we do not know. Scholars say that she died in 1546. They do not tell us how they arrived at this date. They do not tell us where she died. We have to believe that she died in 1546 somewhere after she parted from Vrindavan while roaming with Lalita in the country and visiting various pilgrim places.

## LEGENDS

There are three legends, which are known to many persons in the country and we should record them here.

- Rana sent a cup of poison to Mirabai, she drank it and it became ambrosia or nectar in her mouth.
- Rana sent a basket containing a poisonous snake. When she opened the basket, she found a shaligram—a sacred icon, which is worshipped in India.
- Mirabai went to Dwarka. She went to the Dwarkadhish temple and merged herself in its idol.

These legends leave the impression that Mirabai's life was full of sorrows but her poems or songs do not leave this impression. Her bhajans or songs are full of joy and anyone would see this if one hears them sung. Mirabai bhajans cannot be taken as her autobiography. In poems, one can use figure of speech and that should not be taken as a fact. This is not an isolated view. We quote here Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita and note their assessment of Mira's bhajans. "A line like ... 'He Ri mein to prem divani' catches the attention for the sense of abandon it conveys. The outstanding melodic quality of her work, making it so suitable for singing and dancing, has ensured its wide reach and the plain and direct language and sentiment its easy adaptability to many languages. ... The paradox of Mira's song is contained in its intense lyricism which conveys the overall emotion of joy even when pain, suffering, separation, are being described. This may, ultimately, be the paradox of all art which, like the 'parasmani', transmutes the painful riddle of life into lasting beauty or in Mira's phrase; changes poison into nectar."

We have come to the end of Mira's biography. However, as noted in the beginning, so many biographies of Mira are written that it is impossible to reconcile with them. So many contradictions are found in these biographies that it is necessary to put down a few facts here. For instance, Kumbha Rana is said to be Mira's husband in some biographies. Her relationship with the followers of the Pusti Marg or her letter to Tulsidas is simply controversial. To set the matter right following information is appended.

## HOUSE OF RANAS

**Rana Kumbha (reign: 1433-1468):** He was not only a great warrior but also a very versatile genius. He, as a warrior, defeated Sultan Mahmood Khalji (reign: 1438-1469) of Malva. He captured him and confined him in Chitod for six months. Later, he was released and allowed him to go back to his country. This shows his generosity as a man. Abul Fazl too noted Kumbha's magnanimity in setting his enemy free. Tod said: "To spare a prostrate foe is the creed of the Hindu cavalier and he carries all such maxims to excess ... Such is the character of the Hindu, a mixture of arrogance, political blindness, pride and generosity." He was a great builder. His minister too followed him. He built 32 forts out of the 84 fortresses built to defend Mewad. He built the Tower of Victory in Chitod, which is a magnificent tower in whole of India. His minister built the Jain temple of Ranakpur, which is a gem of a temple in India. These achievements do not exhaust his many great deeds. He was a learned man. He wrote a commentary titled 'Rasikpriya' on Jaidev's 'Git Govind'. To write a commentary on Git Govind; one needs profound knowledge of Sanskrit and music. Indeed, he was a great musicologist. He wrote a book titled 'Sangeet Raj' on musicology. In those days to become a musicologist, one needed mastery on vina. In addition, perhaps he was a great vina player.

In his court, there were great musicians and architects. In short, he was a large hearted man. This is evident from his deeds: "An essential part of the design at [Tower of Victory] is the name of Allah repeated in bands on the third and eight stories, which is coeval with the building of the pillar, and not a later addition." Such was then Rana Kumbha.

I have written at such length on Kumbha only to show that Rajputs were not just brutes and reckless warriors. They were much more. Rao Dudaji (reign: 1461/62- 1515) was a contemporary of Rana Kumbha and he might not have great achievements to his credit as that of Kumbha but might be a large hearted and a remarkable ruler. His home was perhaps a great centre of learning and culture. Mirabai did not fall from the sky. She might have received thorough education in several branches of learning like music, dance and poetics.

**Rana Raimal (reign: 1468? – 1509):** During his reign he had to defend Mewad from the attacks of Delhi and Malwa. He defeated Sultan Ghiyasu-d-din (reign: 1469-1500) of Malwa in several battles. It is said that he gave his daughter in marriage to Viram Deo, the eldest son of Rao Dudaji and the uncle of Mirabai. This shows that Mirabai's family enjoyed great reputation during Rao Dudaji's times.

**Rana Sanga (reign: 1509-1528/29):** He fought 16 or 18 battles against Delhi and Malwa and defeated them. He defeated Mahamud (reign: 1510-1530?) and took him captive. Later, he released him following the example of his grandfather Kumbha. "At the time of Babur's invasion he was but a 'fragment of warrior' lacking an eye and an arm, crippled by a broken leg and bearing honorable scars of no less than eighty wounds. He ... greatly added to the prestige of his house ... that even Babur, who found in him a foe worthy of his steel, admits that the position to which he had attained was won by his valor and sword." He was fatally wounded in the battle with Babar in 1527 and died within two years after the battle.

**Rana Vikramaditya (lifetime: 1517-1536, reign: 1531? – 1536):** He was a boy of 14 when he occupied the Mewad throne. He became famous, along with his sister Uda, as the tormentor of Mirabai. It is likely that he obeyed his mother Karnavati. Mewad had fought many battles and had suffered many casualties. Above this, it had now a stupid king Vikram. Bahdur Shah (reign: 1527-1534) of Gujarat saw that it was a good opportunity to attack Chitod. He already had taken Malwa and killed its Sultan Mahamud mercilessly. He attacked Chitod from Malwa but Rajputs fought to the last man and he entered in the deserted city of Chitod in 1534. He had to vacate it in a fortnight and had to rush to Mandu to face Humayun, who defeated him. He ran for his life to Gujarat and took shelter with the Portuguese, who killed him. This way it was easy for Vikram to rein Chitod again but Banveer killed him at the age of 19. Indeed, it was a tragic and sad end for the tormentor of Mirabai.

**Rana Uday Singh (reign: 1536-1570/71):** He was perhaps the posthumous child of Rana Sanga. After the death of his mother Karnavati, he was an orphan and was looked after by a very brave Rajputani, named Panna. Banveer tried to kill him in 1536 along with his brother Vikram but Panna had managed to send him out of Chitod. Banveer killed her infant child thinking that he was Uday. Panna sacrificed her own child to save Uday and her name is remembered to this date in the history of Chitod. Uday sat on the Mewad throne as a child. When he grew up, he did not accept suzerainty of Akbar (reign: 1556-1605). Akbar became angry and he attacked Chitod. Once again, Rajput defended Chitod to the last man. Akbar won and took a deserted fort. Uday Singh left Chitod and built Udaipur and lived there for the rest of his life but did not submit to Akbar.

Mirabai did suffer due to nasty behavior of some of her relatives in Chitod for a couple of years but she would not be so blind as not to admire the courage and valor of her fellow beings.

## RESIDENCES OF MIRABAI

**Kudaki:** It is about 30 km from Medata. There is a fortress on a hillock. This was the place where Mirabai lived or visited during her childhood.

**Medata:** Here too, there is a fort. Maldeo Rathod of Jodhpur built it after he took Medata from Jaimal in 1556. Today, there is a primary school in it. A temple too exists in its vicinity. Mirabai lived here with her grandfather Dudaji. Akbar took over Medata in 1562 from Rathods.

**Chitod:** Jawaharlal Nehru said: “Think of Chittor and its peerless story, of the amazing heroism of its Rajput men and women!” “In the north we find Chittor, which was to be so famous in after-history for its reckless gallantry, becoming a rallying-point for Rajput clans.” “Chittor, the home of romance and chivalry, full of courage but even then old-fashioned and sticking to outworn methods of warfare, was overwhelmed by Ala-ud-din’s efficient army. There was a sack of Chittor in 1303. But before this could take place, the men and women of the fortress, obedient to old custom, performed the terrible rite of jauhar. According to this, when defeat threatens and there is no other way, in the last extremity, it was better for the men to go out and die in the field of battle and for the women to burn on a pyre ... in any event, death was preferable to slavery and degradation as conquest in war meant in those days.” “Akbar’s armies also laid siege to Chittor—this was before Rana Pratap’s time. Chittor was defended very gallantly by Jaimal. On his death there was the terrible jauhar ceremony again, and Chittor fell.”

Chitod has captured the heart and imagination of the Indian people and the above all quotes, from Jawaharlal Nehru’s pen, testify to it. Chitod was sacked in 1303, 1534 and 1567. We see what happened then.

In 1303, Sultan Alaudin Khilji attacked Chitod to capture its queen Padmini. The story goes as follows: “The Sultan proposed that he would raise the siege provided Padmini was shown to him in the mirror. However, when Rana accompanied him to the gate to bid farewell, he was carried as a captive to the Sultan’s camp ... Rana was rescued by the Rajputs in a chivalrous manner. Gora and about five hundred selected braves were killed. Khilji continued the siege for six months. When all hopes of victory of the Rajputs were lost, the defenders saw their wives and daughters led by Princess Padmini enter the subterranean chamber: the doors were sealed behind and they entered the flames. The great gates of the fortress were then flung wide open. Clad in the saffron robes of death, their helmets wreathed in the garland of the bridegroom, the flower of the world’s chivalry rode to its destruction. Amir Khusrau ... writes that the Fort of Chitor was captured by Alaudin on the 25<sup>th</sup> August 1303.”

In 1534, Sultan Bahadur Shah attacked Chitod. Vikramaditya and Uday Singh were minors and they were placed in safety in their maternal uncle’s home in Bundi. This time Rawat Bagh Singh, the chief of Deolia Pratapgad, defended Chitod. “Baghji, Prince of Deolia, courted the insignia of destruction, the banner of Mewar floated over him ... when the Changi was raised amidst the shouts of her defenders ... garrison put on their saffron robes ... the gates were thrown open and the Deolia chief at the head ... rushed on his fate.” “Karnavati, mother of the Prince, with thirteen thousand Rajput ladies, performed the Johar. Every clan lost its chief ... and in the storm thirty two thousand Rajputs were slain.”

On October 20, 1567, Akbar laid a siege of Chitod. The fierce battle continued up to February 23, 1568, when Akbar shot Jaimal. What happened next we read what Tod said: “They had maintained a protracted defense but had no thoughts to surrender, when a ball struck Jaimal. His soul revolted at the idea of ingloriously perishing by a distant blow. He saw there was no ultimate hope of salvation, so the fatal Johar was commanded and next day gates were opened...”

“When Sallombra fell at the gate of the Sun (Suraj Pol) the command devolved on Patta. He was only sixteen; his father had fallen in the last shock ... His mother commanded him to put on the saffron Robe and to die for Chittor ... She also armed the young bride (wife of Patta) with a lance, with her descended the rock and the defenders of Chittor saw her fall, fighting by the side of his Amazonian mother.”

“The names of Jaimal and Patta are as household words inseparable in Mewar, and will be honored while the Rajpoot retains a shred of his inheritance or a spark of his ancient recollections.”

“Akbar entered Chitor, where thirty thousand of its inhabitants became victims to the ambitious thirst of conquest of this ‘guardian of mankind!’ All the heads of both home and foreign fell, and seventeen hundred of the immediate kin of the prince sealed their duty to their country with their lives.”

“Akbar was so much pleased with their gallantry that he erected statues to the names of Jaimal and Patta at the most conspicuous entrance of his palace at Delhi; and they retained that distinction even when Bernier was in India. (Bernier was the French traveler who came to India in 1663 and mentioned about these statues).”

These, Kudaki, Medata and Chitod, were the places where Mirabai lived in her early life. Certainly, these places had left deep impression on her. In addition, her father's death in the battle of Kanwah in 1527 might have left deep scars in her heart. We see the horror of this war in the words of one of her biographers: “... His [Rana Sanga] reign was noteworthy for the formidable confederacy he was able to organize in the war against Babur. The 1527 battle at [Kanwah] saw the death of not only Ratan Singh [Mira's father] of Merta, but also of Rawal Uday Singh of Dungarpur with two hundred of his clan; Ratna of Salumbar with three hundred of his Chundawat kin; Raimal Rathor, son of the ruler of Marwar; two Chauhan chiefs of the first rank in Mewar and many more. Sanga was an astute tactician, an able administrator and he displayed at his death all the gory marks of a Rajput hero...”

**Dwarka:** We do not have any evidence that Mirabai lived in Dwarka. She might have visited the place as many pilgrims went there. However, it was not a place, in which pilgrims could live for a long time. What we know about Dwarka of Mirabai's (1504-1546) times is as follows: “Mahmud Begada [reign: 1458-1511] ... also continued Ahmad Shah's [reign: 1411-1441] policy and ... destroyed the temple of Dwarka and desecrated the temple at Somnath. ... Mahmud Shah III (1537-1554) ... decreed that Hindu subjects wear red armbands, prohibited public celebration of Holi and Diwali ... and ordered that no instrument be played in Hindu places of worship.” Under such circumstances, it was not possible for any self-respecting person to live there. Moreover, the place was infested with Wagher pirates. One of the biographers of Mirabai, Parita Mukta, wrote: “... the temple authorities worked hand in glove with the Waghers in their piracy.” This was then not a holy place to live in and it is doubtful that Mirabai lived there. In one of her songs, she mentioned Ranchhodji of Dwarka but that could not be the proof that she went and stayed there. Many stories are current about Mira's disappearance in Dwarka and we would like to read about these at appropriate places in this note. For the present, we examine the narration of Mira's life as portrayed in several books.

## **BIOGRAPHERS OF MIRABAI**

How many biographies exist of Mirabai, I do not know. No doubt, there are many and it is not possible for me to locate these. I would like to begin with Nabhadasi's Bhaktamal and G. H. Oza's History of Udaipur (in Hindi). These are the two books to which almost all authors refer to. I haven't seen these two books but I know a little what these contain from other books. Bhaktamal has very little information about Mirabai. It only tells us that there lived a woman saint called Mirabai and how she suffered at the hands of her relatives in Mewar. Oza seems to be a great scholar. According to Lalsinha Shaktawat, he was Mahamahopadhyay and a Pandit. Since he was a scholar-historian, he ought to have based his history on the available documents. History without documents is no history. This maxim is known to all historians. The question before us is how good his book is! Those who refer to it do not comment on this point. We see, under bio data, three dates of Mirabai's birth. Now all these authors whose name we have put in a bracket under bio data rely on Oza. This means that Oza hasn't given Mira's birth date in his book and the three authors have guessed it. It seems that Mira's marriage with Bhojraj is recorded as 1516 AD and this day was akshaya tritiya, which is considered very auspicious for marriage among Hindus. Now if you assume that Mira was married at the age of 12, you would get 1504 as her birth date (see Acharya under bio data). A Gujarati is likely to think that Mirabai was married at the age of 17 then you would get 1499 as her birth date (see Zaveri under bio data). Thakur Jaidev Singh thought that Mira did not want to marry and the marriage was delayed up to her age of 20. Then he got 1496 as the birth date of Mira (see Thakur under bio data). This way we do not know the birth date of Mira. We could be close to Mirabai's birth date if we say it was around 1500 AD. Jaimal Rathod's birth date is September 17, 1507. Mirabai could be older than Jaimal and that is possible. It seems that Oza has given 1546 as the death date of Mira. Almost all authors give this date in their narrations. However, a few authors do not agree with Oza. They argue that Mira wrote in one of her songs that her hairs were white. She also wrote in one another song that her teeth were gone. On this basis, they claim that she lived long. However, they do not state in which year she died. One author assumed that she died in the same year as Rana Uday Singh (1528? -1570) died. This long discourse took us nowhere. We do not know the birth or death date of Mirabai exactly.

Another author called Priyadas wrote a commentary on Bhaktamal but an eminent scholar Hermann Goetz dismissed it as 'collection of silly, sentimental legends'. It means that Priyadas' work is not reliable and we would like to skip it. Now we turn to the works of three eminent scholars, Hermann Goetz, Thakur Jaidev Singh and Mansukhlal Zaveri.

**Hermann Goetz:** He was a curator of Baroda Museum sometime back. His book on Mirabai, I haven't read but I have some quotations of his from Parita Mukta's book. We would like to read these because we get some idea of his Mirabai. According to him Mirabai 'belongs to the greatest figures of mankind. And I, personally, know only one other similar person, Jesus, the Christ, shrouded in the presence of his Divine Father, as she in that of her Divine Husband, pure, loving and misunderstood and misinterpreted like her.' His estimate of Mira is certainly fair but then he goes into ecstasies and writes what Parita Mukta has reported in her book. She wrote: "Hermann Goetz, in his reconstruction of the life of Mira, states that Mira arrived in Dwarka circa AD 1537 at a time when the Ranchhodji temple there was in ruins, and deserted, after having been sacked by ... Mahmud Beghdha. Goetz attributes to Mira the ambition of setting herself up as the 'Gosaiyni' of the temple at Dwarka, by preaching her own interpretation of the Krishna bhakti. Goetz portrays Mira to be a powerful, single-minded person, who might have if she had not been a woman ... become the founder of a sect of her own." All this is pure fantasy and it is surprising that such an eminent scholar could write such undocumented fallacy. He also tells us that Mira ran away to 'live anonymously in the South.' Goetz has written a fictional biography and it does not help us to know anything about Mira. Mira was a devotee and wanted to see Krishna face to face. She didn't aspire for anything else.

**Thakur Jaidev Singh:** He was an eminent musicologist of India and had studied music under some Ustads. During his lifetime, he had heard almost all the great musicians of India. He wrote a book titled 'Indian Music' and the following excerpts are from the said book. "Hearing of her troubles, her uncle Viramji called her to Medata. [Therefore], she left Mewar for good... Now she passed the rest of her life in Vrindabana singing the glory of Lord Krishna and finally in Dwarka where she passed away in about 1546 AD."

"She was a great composer of devotional songs. Like many composers, she did not [first] write out the text of the song, and then set it to tune. In her case, both the text and tune of the song were born as twins. That is why her songs are superb from the point of view of singing. Music was an essential accomplishment of a princess... she must have received musical training at her home. It appears that she availed of the opportunity of further musical training during her stay in Vrindabana. She is said to have invented Mira-Mallara Raga. Shri Gaurishankara Hirachand Ojha says that she had collected her songs in a book called Raga Govind. It is not known whether Shri Ojha has based this statement on any historical evidence or on hearsay. It is; however, not available anywhere."

"All her songs are spontaneous outpouring of her heart; there is no effort at ornamentation. Their rhythm is so perfect that they can easily be set to tala. Unfortunately, we do not have any notation of her songs and so do not know how she rendered them. Her songs have, however, been set to various ragas by musicians and are sung throughout the country. About 250 authentic songs of Mira are available. She has composed her songs mostly in Rajasthani and Brajbhasa. At places, she has used Gujarati also. She has utilized nearly seventy-five ragas for her compositions ... Over and above the ragas in vogue today; she has used some rare ragas like Hamsa-Narayana, Chhaya-tori, Sukha-Soratha, etc., which are not well-known today."

**Mansukhlal Zaveri:** He has written a book titled 'History of Gujarati Literature' for the Sahitya Academi, Delhi. We read his narration: "Miranbai was born in Rajasthan, not in Gujarat. Yet, she is considered to be a Gujarati poet. This is probably due to the fact that the language in which she composed her poems, the language which Dr. Tessitori terms as Old Western Rajasthani, was common to Rajasthan and Gujarat ... the language of her poems ... went on changing with phonetic and morphological changes in the language of the region in which it was spoken. Thus, with the passage of time, the language of Mirabai's poems became Gujarati in Gujarat and Rajasthani in Rajasthan. Miranbai also made Dwarka in Gujarat her home during the last 15 years of her life." We note the last line of Zaveri because we want to comment on it a little later. For the present, we continue with his narration: "... She was born about 1499 in Medata, Rajasthan. Her grandfather Rao Dudaji had; since her very childhood,

drawn her towards bhakti of Shri Krishna, the family deity... Because of her increasing association with ascetics and sadhus, tales started being told about her. Her brother-in-law, Vikramsinh tried as best as he could, to force Miranbai to return to the conventional life of a Rajput House... When the persecution became intolerable, Miranbai left Chitod, Mewad, returned to Medata, thence to Vrindavan and finally settled down in Dwarka, one of the four Dhamas, the holiest of the places for a Hindu ... engrossed in ... bhakti ... she died in 1547."

Zaveri wants to tell us that Mirabai lived in Dwarka for 15 years and died in 1547 (actually 1546, the difference arises due to the fact that some subtract 56 whereas other subtracts 57 from the Samvat year). If we take out 15 from 1546 then it becomes 1531. It means that Mirabai left Chitod in 1531, the year when Vikram came to the throne. When Mirabai was not in Chitod how could Vikram persecute her? Actually, Mirabai left Chitod just before Bahadur Shah Invasion of Chitod in 1534. Then she spent sometime with her uncle in Medata and later went to Vrindavan and lived there for quite a time. Gujaratis are fond of believing that Mirabai lived in the deserted Dwarka because they want to make her a Gujarati poetess somehow. This is a mere fantasy. We do not know where Mirabai died. Now we see what women biographers of Mirabai want to say. Several women have written on Mirabai and their version does not differ much from the standard version available to us. However, there exists one exception and she is Parita Mukta. We have a brief look at her work.

**Parita Mukta:** Her work is important in one respect: she has recorded live the folk bhajan-mandlis singing of Mira's bhajans in Mewad, Marwad and in the region around Dwarka. These recordings have good archival value. As far as her biography of Mira is concerned, it is one more fictional biography as that of Hermann Goetz. There are some funny errors in the book. She tells us that Jaimal 'sought to give of his services to Rana Sanga. Rana Sanga died sometime in 1528 or 1529 and Jaimal went to Mewad in 1556. His cousin brother Uday Singh who gave him Badnor and 360 villages helped Jaimal. Jaimal, in turn, gave his life in the defense of Chitod. She tells us that D. K. Roy based his work on Mira from the notes of Indira Devi, who was the foreign disciple of Aurobindo. Whatever little we know about Indira Devi is she was a Punjabi who lost most of her family members during the partition of India. Parita Mukta has written the biography of Mira based on her personal likes and dislikes. We read a few lines or passages from her book: "It was the Rana who was responsible for the death of Mira, the person who had strived constantly to carve out a life separate and apart from dominant might." ... "History obscures for us the truth of what happened within the temple at Dwarka. The only fact that emerges clearly is that Mira did not wish to return to the land she reviled. Did Mira perhaps take her own life rather than return to a life she had abjured? Was Mira eliminated by the Rana's men? Or did she slip away from the temple at Dwarka, away from the powers who had come to know where she was—and live ... as Hermann Goetz avers?" ... "The story of Mira's mergence into the Krishna murti is one that marks the ultimate negation of worldly relations. It is also an annihilation of self. It is in fact a negation of the very basis of bhakti. Bhakti demands a social relationship ... The bhakta seeks opportunities to demonstrate a love through bhakti. A flight from this—to a mergence with the Ultimate—is a flight away from setting out this relationship."... "There is evidence of an underground passage from within the temple of Dwarka to the outside. It would not have been difficult for Mira to slip away when faced with Rana's emissaries, and later join up with groups of itinerant singers. So Mira travels on, with her ektara in her hand, embracing her liberties and inspiring others. Her songs continue to reach those scarred and humiliated and who grasp from these songs a message of emancipation."

Parita Mukta has strong aversion for Ranas. She wants us to believe that Mira too had the same aversion for Ranas, which she has. She blames them for her death. She further wants us to believe that Mira's songs are a preserve of those who are scarred and humiliated in the society. Her long discourse is nothing but her invented fantasies. It has no historical basis. Mira's songs were admired by Tagore and he composed one or two songs based on hers. Quite a few Rajput nobles admired her. Pratibha Jain and Sangeeta Shrama; who are familiar with Mukta's book, wrote: "It has been contended by some scholars that Meera owes her popularity and survival in public memory to her following amongst depressed and downtrodden section of peasants and artisans, who through the singing of Meera's bhajans seek to flout symbolically the authority of the Rajput ruling family of Mewar. However, it needs to be emphasized that Meera was adored because she was a ... bhakt. Singing of her bhajans or devotion to her never implied an attempt to subvert or challenge Rajput dominance. It was natural attraction towards Meera's intense bhakti that drew people to her. She was able to command respect from both the princes as well as peasants. The author of

Bhaktmal has mentioned the names of chiefs and chieftains who revered Meera, prominent amongst them were King Abay Raj of Idar, Prithviraj of Bikaner and Jai Singh of Jaipur. He also mentions the names of some princesses like Ranavati, wife of Prithviraj and Kichani of Marwar as women Bhakts who came in continuity after Meera passed away and were, possibly, inspired by her. A small sect of Brahmin and other caste widows called Mirabais has been existing in Mewar from 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. More significantly women of this sect have maintained themselves on charity of Mewar state." From the above refutation, it is clear that Mukts's fantasies are not acceptable to many persons.

## TEMPLES OF MIRABAI

Mirabai did not build any temple nor did others build any temple for her. Rana Sanga's rule lasted for about 20 years and he was all the time occupied with battles, which ultimately took his life. Mirabai lived in Chitod at the most for 18 years and when she finally left it, she was of the age of about 30 years. She had no chance to build a temple; it takes time. No doubt, Mira sang and danced before the idols in the temples but we have no way to know which temples she visited. Chitod has many temples even today but which temple Mira liked we do not know. We could have a brief look at the monuments of Chitod. The earliest ruins are those of Buddhist stupas. The earliest Hindu temples belong to 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest Jain temples belong to 11<sup>th</sup> century. Now we see which temples could have existed during Mirabai's stay in Chitod.

**Jain Monuments:** There are 27 Jain shrines, built in 11<sup>th</sup> century and are known as Satbees Deora. A Jain resident of Chitod, named Jija, built Tower of Fame, which is near Mahavir temple, in the 12th century. It was repaired in 1488. Sringer Chavri is a Jain temple dedicated to the 16<sup>th</sup> Jain tirthankar, Shantinath. It was built by Bhandari Belka, the treasurer of Rana Kumbha; during the latter's rule. One more Jain monument is Parasnath temple. It has an inscription dated 1486.

**Hindu Monuments:** The oldest temple in Chitod is Kalika-mata temple. It has an inscription dated 644 AD. Kumbhashyama temple is similar in design and in architecture to Kalika-mata temple and belongs to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is a Varah temple. Rana Kumbha repaired it in 1449 AD. It is sometimes called, as Kumbha's temple. In this complex, there was one another small temple, which was converted into a Mira Mandir around 1955. L. Shaktawat, a former member of Rajasthan Legislative Assembly, believed that Mirabai sang and danced in this temple. Hence, due to his initiative, this temple was renovated by the Archaeological Department of Rajasthan and Mira's picture and an idol of Krishna was installed. This is one more fantasy. Another old temple is Samiddheswar Mandir, which was built by Raja Bhoj of Malva. Rana Mokul repaired it in 1428 AD. A visitor to this temple has left an inscription dated 1150 AD. Adabadji temple of 1483, Pataleshwar temple, Jatashankar temple, Nilkantheswar temple and several other temples are in Chitod. There was no dearth of temples for Mirabai to visit in Chitod.

Today, there are several Mira Mandir in Rajasthan. Near Udaipur, in Ahar, there were some temples of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Today, one of them is Mira Mandir near Mahavir temple. In the Eklingji temple (972 AD) complex too, there is a Mira Mandir. A third Mira Mandir is near Charbhuj temple of Gadhwar and the fourth one is in Nathdwara. In short, today, there is no dearth of Mira Mandir in Rajasthan.

## MIRABAI AND RAIDAS

In four songs of Mira (1504-1546), we find Raidas (1477-1528) as her Guru. Based on these four songs, we have no reason to believe that Mira met Raidas and he accepted her as his disciple. Mira might have heard of Raidas as a great bhakt and she might have accepted him as her Guru without meeting him at all. At the time of Mira's birth, Raidas was 127 years old and was living in Kashi. It is said that Jhali Rani, Ratnakuwari, invited Raidas in Chitod and honored him. Since then, he was living in Chitod and he died in 1528 there. However; Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita informs us in a footnote that little is known about Jhali Rani. Thus, we have no proof that Raidas lived in Chitod. Only if, Raidas lived in Chitod, then Mirabai could have met him between 1516 and 1528 and could become his disciple. A Raidas mausoleum (chhatri) exists before Mira Mandir. It is said that Mira got it built in memory of her Guru. How far this is true we cannot say.

## **MIRABAI AND TULSIDAS**

Tulsidas (1532-1623) began to write his Ram-charit-manas in 1572 and completed it around 1575. Thus, he became famous after 1575. The public did not know him before his Ramayan reached every home. Mirabai (1504-1546) whose life if we extend to 1570, even then, she could not write to Tulsidas as he was not known to her. The beautiful rhetoric 'swasti shri Tulsi gun bhusan' and 'jinke priyat Ram Videhi' are sweet to read and very appropriate to get deceived. That is all to it.

## **MIRABAI AND VALLABHA SAMPRADAYA**

Vallabha (1478-1530) was a simple hearted man. He did not like to live in the famous pilgrim centres like Kashi, Prayag and Vrindavan. He chose to live in an obscure place, called Adel, on the bank of the river Jamuna, near the confluence of Ganga and Jamuna. He occasionally visited Vrindavan but Mirabai (1504-1546) was then not living there. Vallabha died in Kashi in 1530 and Mira arrived in Vrindavan sometime around 1538. Hence, the question of their meeting never arose.

Vallabha Sampradaya is the creation of his dynamic second son Vitthal (1516-1586). Vallabha was not interested in gathering disciples. He helped Govind Dube in his spiritual quest and wrote a book 'Navratna' for his guidance but did not take him in his fold because he wanted him to worship his own deity Ranchhodji and not to change to Shri Nathji, as he felt, that was not necessary. If Mirabai had met Vallabha, he would have advised her to stick to her own path. It is Vallabha's blind followers who became rigid and made distinction between Maryada Bhakti and Pusti Bhakti. They considered the former was to please oneself and the latter was to please the God. They looked down upon Mirabai telling her that her bhakti was of Maryada type. If one accepted Vinoba Bhave's distinction between these two types of Bhakti, then Mirabai's bhakti became Pusti type and those of Vallabha's followers Maryada type.

The behavior of Krishnadas Adhikari of Vallabha Sampradaya is altogether a different matter. He was an arrogant and autocrat administrator of Vallabha's temple in Giriraj. He did not allow Vitthalnath, the second son of Vallabha, to enter in the temple even though he was the head of the Vallabha Sampradaya. Vitthal was worshiping the idol from outside the temple through a window. Krishnadas was so vicious that he ordered the window to be removed and be replaced by a solid wall so that Vitthal could not peep at the idol from outside of the temple. When Raja Birbal came to know of Krishnadas' autocracy, he ordered his men to arrest him and put him in a jail. Vitthalnath pleaded with Raja Birbal and got him released and reinstated to his original position magnanimously. Is it surprising that he rebuffed Mirabai and brought shame to his Guru and his Sampradaya? There is no point in referring to Mirabai's priest Priyadas who became a follower of Vallabha's Sampradaya and abused Mirabai because this might be hearsay. After all Mirabai was, a princess and nobody would dare to abuse her because they would be afraid of her relatives and admirers. Mirabai was fearless and independent minded princess. She would not submit before any temple autocrat.

## **MIRABAI AND CHAITANAYA SAMPRADAYA**

Chaitanaya (1486-1533) visited Vrindavan around 1517 when Mirabai (1504-1546) was living in Chitod. Later, he settled down in Jagannath Puri and died there in 1533. It is obvious that Mirabai and Chaitanaya could not have met. If the hearsay of Mirabai chiding Jiv is true, then it is gratifying to learn that Jiv Goswami respected Mirabai and touched her feet. He was courageous enough to set aside the sanyas rule not to see a woman.

## **MIRABAI AND TANSEN/AKBAR**

Akbar, along with Tansen, went to see Mirabai is a fantasy. Mirabai died in 1546 and Akbar came to throne in 1556. Akbar forcibly brought Tansen to his court in 1562—the year when Akbar forcibly took Medata. In 1567, he attacked Chitod. Even if we extend Mira's life up to 1570, had Akbar time to meet Mira or was she willing to meet Akbar who took away her birth place Medata? Think!

## **MIRABAI AND HER BHAJANS**

Mirabai's bhajans are praised and are well known to many. We won't be able to add any more praise. We note some records, which became famous. Subhalaxmi's records of Mira bhajan HMV N 14402, 'baso more nainanme Nandlal' and HMV N 14422, 'hari tum haro janki bhid' are very good (See also HMV India HTC 03B 1615). In the same manner Juthika Ray's cassette HMV India 04B 4378 has 'mane chakar rakhoji' and 'paga ghungharu bandh Mira nachi'. Dilip Kumar Roy's record HMV N 27347 'janam maranke sathi' is also good. So is Kanika Banerjee's record 'kabhu mile piya mera' (the record number I do not have). These few recordings are representative ones otherwise practically all great Hindu classical singers have sung Mira's bhajans and their recordings too are there. However, I do not have numbers for their records.

## **VINOBA'S COMMENTS ON MIRABAI**

Mirabai's name is well known all over India. With it, she keeps a special place in the world history. In North India, Mirabai's fame is equaled by none other than Tulsidas and Kabir. When we talk about the medieval saints, then whatever regards Tulsi and Kabir received from people, perhaps, no other received. In whatever rank they were then, the same rank comes to Mira's name today. All these three persons were not recognized well in their own times. Every now and then, they had to suffer from ill fame. Tolerating every thing, they kept their independence. They went on their chosen path ignoring the bad circumstances of their times. Their courage did not fall apart.

Mirabai considered herself as God's dasi; she did not like to be someone else's dasi. People laughed at her behavior. Today, Mirabai is not there but her bhajans are. Mirabai was a rebel saint. Whatever strength her rebellion had, was the strength of Brahma-vidya. There are two kinds of bhakti: Mariyada bhakti (ordained devotion) and Pust-bhakti (intuitive bhakti). Once one gets engrossed, then joy comes in life. Mira's devotion was not ordained one. She broke from it and went over to intuitive one. Her family lineages on both sides were renowned for bravery. They were protector of religion and practiced devotion to God. Their devotion was of the first type. This type of devotion was not there in Mira. She had to stand against the society to remain a brahmcharini (celibate).

Rajasthan's Nagor district is the birthplace of Mirabai. She was a king's daughter. She got engrossed in devotion to God. In those days, giving up the covering of the head, tying the anklets and dancing before the masses, just think of this? People thought her to be mad. They disapproved her ways but she stood up against this disapproval. She did not give up her devotional path. She remained firm. Today in India, Mira's name is taken with the same veneration as that of Sita. The bravery she had shown is wondrous in the history of India. Even today, women remain in-door in Rajasthan. There, 400 years ago, she came out of home and danced before her beloved idol to fulfill her devotion to God.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Mirabai was the highest flowering of Rajput ideals and culture. What was the basic characteristic of a Rajput? He would die but would not surrender or submit to a foe. Mirabai was a true Rajputani. She did not surrender to the social tyranny of her times. This tyranny was not confined only among Rajputs but was also a norm among almost all the communities of India, including the various religious establishments. Mirabai stood against them all. It is easy to fight with an enemy but it is difficult to fight with one's own kith and kin. Mirabai showed this supreme bravery. She died, no one knows where and when, but she did not submit. She left behind her immortal bhajans, which give divine joy to her listeners. She indeed lived a rare life.

## **DADU DAYAL (1544-1603)**

Dadu was an eminent saint of Rajasthan. His followers read Dadubani. They are called Dadu Panthi. Yet, we know hardly anything about his life. I came to know of him from Rabindranath Tagore's book 'The Religion of Man'. Tagore, in Appendix III of his book, following an article written by Kshiti Mohan Sen, commented on the works of Dadu. There, I read a passage, which impressed me much. I quote it herewith. "That is why," cries Dadu, "your universe, this creation of yours, has charmed me so—your waters and your breezes,

and the earth which holds them, with the ranges of the mountains, its great oceans, its snow-capped poles, the blazing sun, because through all the three regions of earth, sky and heaven, amidst all their multifarious life, it is your ministrations, your beauty, that keeps me enthralled. Who can know you, O Invisible, Unapproachable, and Unfathomable! Dadu has no desire to know; he is satisfied to remain enraptured with all beauty of yours, and to rejoice in it with you." Since then, I searched for information on Dadu but I found none. What I write here might be hearsay, but that is all I have.

## **BIODATA**

Name: Dadu  
Birth Place: Ahmedabad  
Birth date: Sometime in 1544  
Mother's name: Not known to me.  
Father's name: Not known to me.  
School: Not known to me.  
Works: Dadubani  
Death Place: Narana. (It is situated between Fulera and Ajmer Railway Stations).  
Death date: Sometime in 1603.

## **LIFE**

We have already noted earlier that we don't have any information about Dadu's life. His disciple Jan Gopal wrote the earliest biography of Dadu. Even then, various writers who write on Dadu give contradictory information. What we can do is to record this contradictory information. The authors of 'Shared Heritage, True Heritage' write as under: "Born in a pinjara (cotton carder) family in Ahmedabad, Dadu spent his life roaming in the western India, especially Rajasthan. Some people believe that he was a Muslim. Founder of Dadu Panth, he renounced the world at the age of eleven. He preached the essence and philosophy of religion through Dadu Vani and was opposed both by Hindu and Muslim clergy." Sant Punit, a recent writer of Sants' biographies, wrote in Gujarati: "We do not find whether Dadu Dayal was a Hindu or Muslim—he was a believer in Parabrahma and a devotee of Vishva Dharma (World Religion). From his Vani (sayings) no such distinction comes to the fore. It is said that Dadu's birthplace was Ahmedabad. He was obtained from the waters of the river Sabarmati due to the grace of a Yogi." Another writer tells us: "Dadu Dayal was found by an affluent businessman floating on the river Sabarmati. He later moved to Amber, near Jaipur." Dr. Makarand Mehta, a Gujarati columnist, wrote in a Gujarati newspaper: "Here, it should be specifically remembered that Kabir was a Muslim carder (should be weaver), Rahidas was a Hindu chamar and Dadu was a Hindu carder." Whenever this Muslim-Hindu problem is brought to the fore then it becomes impossible to gather any information about the concerned man. What remains then is: one has to quit and we quit.

Dadu lived mostly in Rajasthan. He gathered there many disciples, perhaps 152. Prominent among them were Rajjab, Sunderdas, Jagjivan, Kshetradas, Madhavdas, Kazi Kadam and Sheikh Farid. Among these, Sunderdas (1596-1689) was brought up by Dadu himself. Sunderdas went to live with Dadu when he was about five or six years old. Perhaps he got about two years to live with him because Dadu died in 1603. Anyway, he was the most distinguished disciple of Dadu. His works Jnansamundra and Sundarvilas are famous. He said of Dadu: "One carder so came that he taught how to card the soul in the form of cotton." After the death of Dadu, Sunderdas went to Kashi for his education. There he learnt Sanskrit and scriptures. He wrote most of his works in Fatehpur. He was born in Dausa near Jaipur and died in Sanganer, that too near Jaipur. At the time of his death he said: "My doctor (vaidya) is Ramji and my medicine is God's name (Harinam)."

Vinoba Bhave also took notice of Sunderdas. He said to his followers in Rajasthan: Your village Narayana, Rajasthan, is a historical place. Doyen of Hindi language, Shri Sunderdasji lived here for years. Here he did his tapasya (meditation) and wrote his books. He has written in one place: 'God comes taking various forms. He appears somewhere in Punya-rup (good form); he appears somewhere in Pap-rup (evil form) ... During the time of seeing God in various formations, knowledge is seen and so is ignorance.' (Is Narayana and Narana the same? I do not know).

Dadubani contains not only Dadu's works but also many other saints' works. Dadu admired Ravidas, Kabir and Nanak. These saints influenced him and their works too are found along with his poems or songs. I give here a saying of Dadu, which I have taken from 'Shared Heritage, True Heritage'. "I have seen and tested it all. There is no 'Other'. The same 'Being' dwells in all ... Why then Hindu or Muslim?" My favorite bhajan of Dadu is: 'Ajhu na nikshe pran kathor.' I do not know anything about his recorded bhajans.

## CHAPTER 9



Area: 196624 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: (H: % / M: %) / Source: 2001 Census.

### NARSI MEHTA (1414-1480)

Narsi Mehta was a saint who lived in Kathiawad. Perhaps he was known in Kathiawad but outside of it in Gujarat is doubtful. He was born in a rich community of Nagar Brahmins, who were mostly bureaucrats and were in the service of small rulers. Narsi Mehta did not fit in this class and he came into troubles. He spent most of his time singing devotional songs with downtrodden men and women. He hasn't left followers behind him. In recent times he has become famous because of Mahatma Gandhi whose favorite bhajan, 'Vaishnav Janto tenere kahiye', was sung repeatedly by several eminent singers in his prayer meetings. He hasn't captured the heart of the Gujarati people, as did Shankardev in Assam, Chaitanya in Bengal, Jnaneshwar in Maharashtra and Tulsidas in the North India. The authors of 'Shared Heritage, True Heritage' introduce him as follows: "Universally acknowledged as the father of Gujarati poetry, Narasinh is one of the outstanding saints of his times... He used to sing Bhajans in Harijanvas resulting in ostracizing [him] from the Brahmin community. Gandhiji's favorite bhajan Vaishnav jan has been written by him."

#### BIODATA

Name: Narsi

Birth Place: Talaja in Kathiawad

Birth date: sometime in 1414

Mother's name: Laxmigauri/Dayagauri/Parvatibai (according to Sant Punit)

Father's name: Krishnadas (according to Sant Punit)

School: A pathshala in Junagadh

Works: Har-mala (doubtful), Samalsha-no Vivaha, Govind-Gaman, Surta-Sangram, Sudama-Charitra, Rasa-Sahasrapadi and Padas of Bala-Lila, Vasant, Hindola and Bhakti jnana and vairagya. The authorship of several padas attributed to Narsimha is doubtful (according to Mansukhlal Zaveri).

Death Place: Junagadh

Death date: sometime in 1480

#### LIFE

Narsi lost his father at the age of three and his mother at the age of eight. His grandmother Jaykunwar brought him up along with his elder brother Vansidhar in their home in Talaja. His elder brother was 16 or 17 years older than he was. Narsi could not speak up

to his age of eight. His grandmother took him to a saint, and because of him, Narsi began to speak. Vansidhar soon found a clerical job in Junagadh. The family now moved to Junagadh from Talaja. Vansidhar was married to Duritgauri. Narsi was sent to a pathshala in Junagadh. At the age of ten Narsi was married to Manekgauri. Narsi was not much interested in his studies. He was running after monks and mendicants who passed through his town on their way to Girnar. He was singing and dancing with them. His elder brother tried to bring him round but he did not succeed. When he was about 16, his brother took him out of the pathshala (school). He was given some domestic work like looking after the horses. In his work, he was sincere and there was not much trouble in his home. However, his sister-in-law did not like Narsi not earning his livelihood. She was harsh in dealing with her brother-in-law. Narsi ignored her. In due course, Narsi had a daughter Kunwarbai and a son Shamaldas. Yet, Narsi was not earning to up keep his family. In the family, Duritgauri often quarreled with Narsi and his wife. Vansidhar kept quiet. He even arranged for Kunwarbai's marriage and met all the expenses. Duritgauri could no longer tolerate her husband's behavior. She started instigating her husband. Finally, a day came when Narsi left home. He had no place to go. He went to a dilapidated temple of Shiva. He sat before a Shivling and worshipped it for a few days. Now legends begin and we know nothing about Narsi but the legends and we close the narration of his life after giving the gist of these legends. Shiva appeared before Narsi. He took him to Dwarka. There he saw Raslila (dance performance of Krishna and milk maidens (gopis). He liked it very much and decided to live rest of his life in Junagadh doing bhajans and Raslila with people who joined him. He left the burden of family on Krishna. In turn, Krishna did everything for him. Since, Narsi belonged to a rich community, Krishna spent lavishly on him. Krishna came personally in the marriage of his son Shamaldas and poured tons of money to show off to his community Narsi's wealth. The same thing Krishna did during some ritual called 'Mameru' for his daughter Kunwarbai. Even Krishna cleared a promissory note, which Narsi wrote on Krishna & Co. after taking the money from some pilgrims who were going to Dwarka. This way Narsi's life story went on and he died sometime in 1480. This version is based on Sant Punit's akhiyan (a literary form). Now we read another version from the pen of Mansukhlal Zaveri, which is in English. It runs as follows:

"... Losing both his parents at a very young age, he [Narsi] had to be brought up at the house of a cousin. From his young age he loved to meet holy men and ascetics visiting Junagadh on their way to Girnar (a holy mountain) and listen to their bhajans (devotional songs) and religious discourses. Because of this and because of his total lack of interest in the affairs of this world, he lost favor with his cousins and other relatives. Disgusted with the treatment meted out to him and hurt by a mala fide sarcastic remark made by his cousin's wife, the young Narasimha left the house, repaired to a jungle, came across a Shiva-ling that had been left neglected for a long time, worshipped it devoutly for a few days and went to Dwarka, where he saw the Rasa Lila."

"This Rasa Lila leaves an indelible impression on the mind of the young visionary. It stirs his imagination and a poet is born. Narasimha returned to Junagadh, a changed man. He marries (Some scholars say, he had married earlier). But the ways of the world have little attraction for him. He receives [just in] time sudden assistance from somewhere on ... the marriage of his son Shamal; and once again at the ceremony of the Simanta (A function held on the seventh month of the first conception of a lady) of his daughter Kunwarbai. He led a life thoroughly dedicated to his Lord Krishna. He died in circa 1480."

## WORKS

Narshi Mehta's one bhajan is very attractive. It is 'akhil brahmandma ek tu srihari' and its English translation is given by the authors of 'Shared Heritage, True Heritage' as under. "In the entire universe, there is only You. ... Manifest in a myriad forms yet one and eternal ... You are the divine in matter ... You are the essence in light ... In silence You dwell as words of the Vedas." Another bhajan, which became famous all over India, as stated earlier, is 'vaishnav jan'. It is based on some Sanskrit scriptural text of ancient times. We give both here in English translation—the first is in Sanskrit translated by Basham; the second is in Gujarati translated by someone whose name I have lost.

"Visnu is most pleased with him who does good to others, ... who never utters abuse, calumny or untruth, ... who never covets another's wife or wealth, ... and who bears ill will to none, ... who neither beats nor slays any living thing, ... who is ever diligent in the service of

the gods and of brahmans and his teachers, ... who always desires the welfare of all creatures, ... as of his children and of his own soul.”

“He is the true Vaishanava who knows and feels another’s woes as his own. Ever ready to serve, he never boasts.

“He bows to every one, and despises no one, keeping his thought, word and deed pure. Blessed is the mother of such a one.

“He looks upon all with an equal eye. He has got rid of his lust. He reveres every woman as his mother. His tongue would fail him if he attempted to utter an untruth. He covets not another’s wealth. The bonds of earthly attachment hold him not. His mind is deeply rooted in detachment (renunciation). Every moment he is intent on reciting the name of Rama (God). All the holy places are ever present in his body.

“He has conquered greed, hypocrisy, passion and anger. A sight of such a Vaishnava, says Narasaiyo, saves a family through seventy-one generations.”

Now we give an overall estimate of his works in the words Mansukhlal Zaveri: “... He has, at the touch of his magic wand, turned philosophy into poetry and many of his padas of jnana and vairagya bear the stamp of a master. But he excels in his padas of bhakti, which is an end in itself...” “The quantitative output of Narasimha is greater than that of Miranbai. Krishnabhakti is the only inspiration of both ... But the variety of themes and topics one finds in the poetry of Narasimha is not seen in the poetry of Miranbai. In spite of that, Miranbai’s poetry sometimes seems superior to that of Narasimha. Miranbai’s is a natural heart of a gopi.” “... Narasimha, again, does not possess in the same degree the loveliness of diction, delicacy of feeling and refinement of taste that Miranbai possesses...”

This is all we know of Narsi Mehta. Subhalaxmi beautifully sings his bhajan ‘vaishnav jan’ and her record is available in the market.

## CHAPTER 10



Area: 307713 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 96,878,627 (H: % / M: 10.6%) / Source: 2001 Census.

### NAMDEV (1270-1350)

Namdev was one of the foremost saints, among the many saints, who lived in Maharashtra during his lifetime. His contemporary saints were Gora Kumbhar the potter, Narhari the goldsmith and Sena the barbar. A dancing girl; named Kanhopatra, too was his disciple. According to Kshiti Mohan Sen, Chokhamela, an untouchable Mahar, when he met Namdev in Pandharpur along with Jnandev, he accepted Namdev as his Guru. Namdev's maidservant, Janabai, too came to be known as a saint. Vinoba Bhave said: Namdev is a personification of Love. According to him Namdev's bhajan is full of love. There is no point in making any comparison. Its simplicity touches the human heart. Namdev is only a bhakt full of love. Only Kesav (God) knows Nam's love; Kesav lives in Nam. This is Namdev; he does not remain without touching the human heart. In one of his abhangs he describes God: O God! Your name is beautiful, your body is beautiful, and your sight is beautiful, yours everything is beautiful but love among all these is most beautiful. From this characterization, we come to know that Namdev was a simple hearted man full of love for mankind.

### BIODATA

Name: Namdev

Birth Place: Pandharpur (according to one version); Narsi-bamani (according to the other version)

Birth date: Sometime in 1270

Mother's name: Gonai

Father's name: Dama Sheti

School: Educated at home, tailoring

Works: A collection of abhangs (devotional songs)

Death Place: Pandharpur (controversial); some say he died in Punjab.

Death date: Sometime in 1350

## LIFE

Namdev's parents lived in a village called Narsi-bamani in Marathawada of Maharashtra. In the present day geographical nomenclature, the village is in the Parbhani District of Maharashtra. According to one version, Dama Sheti was an ardent devotee of Vithoba of Pandharpur. He wanted to live close to his deity, hence, he and his family moved to Pandharpur. Here Namdev was born. According to the other version, Dama Sheti's family continued to live in Narsi-bamani and Namdev was born there. As Namdev grew, he too became an ardent devotee of Vithoba like his father and suggested to the family that they move to Pandharpur. The family liked the idea very much and they moved to Pandharpur. Namdev began to visit Vithoba's temple daily and grew so fond of it that he did not like to go anywhere else. At home, he learnt the family profession of tailoring. In the temple and home, he began to sing ovis (devotional songs of the locality). This became then the routine for him.

Pandharpur has its own history. There lived a devotee called Pundlik. He was not only devoted to the God but also to his parents. Once, Krishna decided to meet Pundlik because he liked his devotion. When he went to his home, he found him engrossed in serving his parents. He asked Krishna to wait until he finished his duty and threw a brick for him to sit. Krishna stood on this brick until Pundlik met him. In the memory of this meeting, the temple was built on the same spot where Krishna stood on the brick. The brick is called Vit in Marathi and Krishna gained the name Vithoba because he stood on a brick. Krishna's wife Rukmini is called Rakhumai there. This is then the mythical story. Pandharpur is one of the most famous pilgrim centres of Maharashtra and Vithoba and Rakhumai are worshipped there.

Namdev grew in this famous centre of devotion. He too began to compose abhangs (devotional songs) of his own. He had natural sweet voice and he sang his own abhangs, which people liked very much. He also carried on his family tailoring work along with his father. He married Rajai, the daughter of Govindrao of Beedar and had sons and daughters. This way he was living a contented life in Pandharpur.

In due course, Namdev's reputation spread in the surrounding areas. People flocked to Pandharpur to hear his abhangs and joined him in singing kirtans. He is considered as the founder of kirtan singing in Maharashtra. When Jnandev visited Pandharpur along with his brothers and sister, they met Namdev and Chokhamela. Perhaps, during this period, Chokhamela chose Namdev as his Guru and Jnandev and Namdev became close friends. Jnandev suggested to Namdev that he join with them in going on a pilgrimage of India. Namdev said to Jnandev that for him Pandharpur was the last place to go on a pilgrimage. Anyway, Jnandev prevailed upon Namdev in joining them in their journey. Namdev reluctantly dragged on complaining on the way of missing Vithoba and Pandharpur. In this manner, they arrived, on the way, to Gora Kumbhar's village. Gora received them warmly and they became his guests. When bhaktas met, first thing they did together was kirtan—singing together some devotional songs. After the completion of Kirtan, Muktabai, the sister of Jnandev, asked the senior most member of the group, Gora, to test the spiritual development of each of the participants who were seated there. Gora found every one of them well developed as devotees except Namdev. He said Namdev was somewhat less developed because he had not found a Guru. Namdev did not like Gora's verdict but kept quiet. The group continued the journey visiting one shrine after another and finally the pilgrimage was over. Namdev returned to Pandharpur but did not forget his want of a Guru. He decided to find a Guru and someone suggested to him the name of Visoba Khechar. He went to him and asked him to take him as a disciple. Visoba agreed and made him to realize the fact that God is in everything and everywhere. Namdev now became an enlightened man and began to see God everywhere and not only in Pandharpur. Once, a dog took away a piece of bread from his house. Namdev ran after him calling him back. He was shouting: O God! Please stop, the piece of bread is without butter. Please take this buttered piece. Thus, he had reached that stage in his spiritual development.

In 1296 AD, Jnandev took samadhi (voluntarily put an end to his life—not suicide but by yogic means) in Alandi. Namdev was present at the site. Around 1310, after Jnandev's samadhi, Allaudin Khilji's forces invaded Maharashtra and put an end to the Shinghan Rule of Devgiri. Namdev was a witness to this tragedy. Perhaps this incident made him to visit Punjab from where the Muslim invaders had come. According to Vinoba Bhave, Namdev

lived in Punjab for 20 years; he learnt Punjabi and Hindi languages and wrote devotional songs in those languages. Further, he said: Namdev, among other saints like Nanak, Kabir and Tulsidas, stopped the religious invasion of Islam—the one great thing he and others did. Namdev's bhajans found place in Guru Granth Sahib of Sikhs. According to the renowned Marathi poet Moropant, Namdev made the name Vitthal of Krishna popular all over India.

During Namdev's stay in Punjab, he earned his livelihood by doing tailoring work. His further life is controversial. According to some, Namdev returned to Pandharpur after his 20-year stay in Punjab and died there in 1350 at the age of 80. According to others, he died in Punjab and his disciple Bahordas built a memorial in Dhuman, which is extant to this date.

## LEGENDS

- Once, Namdev's father went out of the town. He asked his son to worship the idol of God and offer him a bowl of milk. The son did exactly as the father had said but the God was not drinking the milk. Namdev went on requesting the God to drink the milk but he was not drinking. Finally, he said he would put an end to his life and struck his head against the wall. God had no alternative but to drink the milk to save the child.
- Namdev was singing devotional songs at the gate of the temple. The priest came and asked him to go away. Namdev asked him where to go at this late hour of the night. The priest told him to go behind the temple and spend the night under a tree. Namdev went there and began to sing his devotional song. The gate of the temple turned round and faced Namdev and God heard his devotional songs. Namdev became famous all over Maharashtra and people flocked to hear his devotional songs.
- When Jnandev asked Namdev to accompany him on a pilgrimage, Namdev replied: "I would like to consult my Vithoba." They went to the temple and Vithoba urged Namdev to accompany Jnandev.
- We have already narrated the incident in Gora's house. The actual version is: Mukta pointed to an implement in Gora's house and asked: "What is it?" Gora said: "It is my implement to test the backed pots; if the pot is raw, it will break on striking it gently." Mukta exclaimed: "Test us!" Gora gently touched each participant's head with the implement and said: "Namdev is raw."
- On his return from the pilgrimage, Namdev complained to Vithoba about Gora's verdict. Vithoba agreed with Gora and asked Namdev to make Visoba Khechar his Guru. Namdev went to see Visoba. He found Visoba sleeping in a temple with his legs on the idol (shivling). When Visoba saw Namdev, he asked him to remove his leg from the idol. Namdev tried to remove Visoba's leg from the idol but wherever he placed the leg the idol appeared there. Namdev was stunned. Visoba said: "God is everywhere."
- Once, Namdev asked Vithoba: "Who is a greater bhakta than me?" The God replied: "I kept ornaments of gold on the way. Ranka passed by the way and he covered them with dust. He did so because his wife Banka could not see them. Banka asked: "What were you doing?" Ranka told what he did. Banka said: "Good you did. Ornaments are dust to me." Then God said: "Ranka and Banka are my great devotees."

## WARKARI SAMPRADAYA

Namdev, along with Jnandev, is considered the founder of Warkari Sampradaya. In Maharashtra, there are five main sampradayas: Mahanubhav Sampradaya of Chakradhar Swami of Vidarbha, Nath Sampradaya, Datta Sampradaya, Samarath Sampradaya of Swami Ramdas and Warkari Sampradaya. The most popular sampradaya of Maharashtra is the Warkari and has the largest mass following even today.

## DISCIPLES OF NAMDEV

**Chokhamela:** According to Kshiti Mohan Sen, Chokhamela, his sister Nirmaladevi, his wife and his brother-in-law were all ardent devotees. Chokhamela was a resident of the village Mangalveda, which is near Pandharpur. He was clearing dead bodies of animals there. While repairing a wall in his village, it collapsed and he was buried under the debris along with his co-workers. He died in 1282 AD. He sacrificed his life for the well being of the residents of his village.

**Janabai:** She was a maidservant in Dama Sheti's house. Namdev had vowed to compose a large number of verses in praise of Vithoba. Since the number was large, he had divided the

task amongst the members of his household that included Janabai. This way, Janabai too got an opportunity to compose an allotted number of compositions. Her verses are found in Namdev Gatha, which contains Namdev's verses along with those of his wife, his mother, and his sons and daughters. We read here one of Janabai's compositions: "Those who join a wedding party get delicacies to eat. They who have the philosopher's stone turn iron to gold and adorn themselves with jewels. Being the maidservant of Namdev who is immersed in love and devotion for Vithoba, Jani too partakes of this joy (From Manushi)."

### **VINOBA'S COMMENT ON NAMDEV**

Namdev blessed all the saints of his times. Perhaps, God was not familiar to anyone else, as much as, he was familiar to Namdev. Wherever he went, there, he touched the heart of the people and brought change in their heart. His wife was a great saint. His children had the heart of devotees (bhakta). His maidservant, Janabai, was a saint. Those saints who came later than he did expressed their gratitude for Namdev's works. Perhaps, he would be considered as the earliest poet among all the recognized poets of Hindi literature. In one word, Namdev was a 'Premi' (Lover).

### **JNANDEV (1275-1296)**

Jnandev was a saint, who was much respected among saints. Namdev was senior to him but he respected him highly. The saints who came after Jnandev have paid glowing tributes to him. Jnandev was a child prodigy and his genius is seen in his devotional songs and the four books, which he wrote between his age of 15 and 21. His life span was just 21 years and his works have become immortal and made him immortal. His biographer, P. Y. Deshpande considered him a timeless wonder. Vinoba Bhave said: "I have written in one place in my 'Gita Pravachan' that I am prepared to take birth again to taste Jnandev's sweet language or speech." Then he asked: Who was Jnaneshwar? He answered: Jnaneshwar was a learned man, yogi, bhakta, religious preceptor, poet, master of words and everything. Jnandev's genius is acknowledged by all. Reading his works, readers go into ecstasies. We now see his bio data.

### **BIODATA**

Name: Jnaneshwar

Birth Place: Alandi

Birth date: sometime in 1275

Mother's name: Rukmini

Father's name: Vithalpanta

School: Studied scriptures in Paithan for three years

Works: Bhavarth Dipika (Jnaneshwari, magnum opus), Anubhavamruta (or Amrutanubhav), Changdev-pasashti, Haripath and devotional songs

Death Place: Alandi

Death date: October 25, 1296

### **FAMILY HISTORY**

Jnandev's lineage is traced back up to his paternal ancestor, Hariharpanta Kulkarni, of Apegaon. He was a Desasth Yajurvedi Brahmin. His gotra was Panch-pravarankt Vasta. We would not like to go so far in his family history. Rather, we would like to begin with Harihar's great grandson, Trymbakpanta, the great grandfather of Jnandev. His ancestral home was in Apegaon, a town or a village, some 12 to 13 km from Paithan, the famous cultural centre of medieval Maharashtra, on the bank of the river Godavari. He moved from Apegaon to Devgiri, 'the political capital of the Yadava Kingdom, in about the year 1207 AD.' He had two sons, Govindpanta and Hariharanpanta. He became sad because his son Hariharan died on a battlefield. He sought refuge in devotion to God. The famous Gorakhnath of the Nath Panth initiated him. His samadhi (memorial) is in Apegaon. His son, Govindpanta, was married to Nirai, the sister of Krishnajipanta Devkule of Paithan. Govindpanta and Nirai, the grandfather and grandmother of Jnandev, were well versed in Veda and Vedanta. Gahininath, the disciple of Gorakhnath, initiated them. Their son, the father of Jnandev, Vithalpanta, who came late in their life, was almost a born Vairagi (monk). He showed no zest for worldly life from his early childhood. He sought the company of monks and went to various pilgrim centres of Maharashtra in search of a Guru, who could lead him to

self-realization. In such a state of mind, he roamed here and there. Jnandev's biographer, P. Y. Deshpande tells us: "In his [Vithalpanta] wanderings he once happened to be the guest of Siddhopanta Kulkarni of Alandi, a village 15 miles [24 km] from Poona, the greatest educational and cultural centre of medieval and modern Maharashtra. Siddhopanta developed in intimacy with Vithalpanta, which resulted in the marriage of his daughter Rukmini, to Vithalpanta." After his marriage, Vithalpanta soon realized his mistake. He decided to go to Kashi, the all India centre of learning, to pursue his quest for knowledge and self-realization. In going to Kashi, did he take the leave of his wife? We do not know. Anyway, he left for Kashi. There, he happened to meet a Sanyasi, Shripad Swami (some say Ramanand). For a time, he became Shripad's disciple and stayed with him. Later, he asked him, without telling him about his marriage to Rukmini, to initiate him in the Order of Sanyas. Shripad Swami initiated Vithalpanta duly and called him Chaitanyashrama.

After sometime, Shripad Swami decided to go on a pilgrimage to South India. During his wanderings, he accidentally broke his journey in Alandi. Rukmini who was living a pious life in Alandi and doing puja (worship) of all kinds happened to meet Shripad Swami. The Swami was deeply impressed by the moral character and kindly sweet disposition of Rukmini. When Rukmini bowed to the saint, he said: "Putravati Bhav (be mother of a son)." Rukmini was taken aback and felt embarrassed. Shripad Swami noticed this and asked her: "What's the matter?" She told her story. In turn, Shripad Swami was now embarrassed. He began an inquiry in the village and came to know that his own disciple was in error. He ended his pilgrimage there and then and retraced his step to Kashi. On reaching Kashi he summoned Chaitanyashrama and told him: "Renounce your renunciation and go back to your loving wife. There can be no self-realization through a lie and subterfuge." Chaitanyashrama had to become again Vithalpanta and had to return to Alandi. He did respect his Guru's words. He returned to Rukmini. Their suffering now began which we see in their life below.

## LIFE

We do not know where Vithalpanta began his new life. Was it in Apegaon or in Alandi? We have no idea. What we know is: his community ostracized him and his family. It is sad indeed! According to one version, he built a hut on the outskirts of Alandi and lived there with his wife. His routine was to go in the town and obtain 'bhiksha' (offering of cereals or food) from the generous inhabitants of Alandi. Whatever he got he gave it to his wife. They lived on bhiksha. The rest of the time he spent after his spiritual quest. The life was hard for both of them. The householder society considered them sinners because Vithal had renounced Sanyas. The Order of Sanyas considered Vithal an imposter. In such circumstance, they became parents of four children, three sons and a daughter. Vithal named them to signify his quest for emancipation and the ordeals of his life. He named the first child Nivrutti (retirement from the worldly life that lead to education), the second child Janenshwer (Lord of knowledge, who leads step by step to emancipation), the third child Sopan (step which helps to go ahead) and the fourth child Muktabai (final emancipation through self-realization). Their children were simply wondrous. From their tender age, they sensed the sorrow of their parents. The parents did not mind the hardship of their life but they could not bear the insult heaped upon their children by the society that included even innocent children. The parents also knew that their children were innocent and they suffered because of their sin. They were aghast. They felt that they needed a break from this vicious atmosphere. Rukmini suggested that they should go on a pilgrimage to Trymbakehwar, a holy place near Nasik. The family liked the idea and they set out from Alandi. They got a relief for six months. An incident, which took place on this trip, we read in the words of Deshpande: "During a visit with their parents to Trymbakeshwar ... Nivrutti quietly slipped away to a mountain cave near the shrine of Mahadev. There he was initiated by Gahininatha, the Master who had initiated the grandparents of these children." When parents came to know of this holy event they were pleased and they returned home happy. Now time came for the sacred thread ceremony of his eldest son. The father approached the elders of the society and pleaded before them to take his children in the society because they were innocent and not to punish them for his sins. He asked them to allow him to perform the sacred thread ceremony of his son. The elders, wherever he went, simply turned down his request. Finally, he asked them what penance they suggested for his sins. They said that the death was the only penance for him. Vithal thought over it and ultimately decided to drown himself at the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Jamuna at Prayag. It is not clear whether Vithal and Rukmini both went to Prayag together or one after the other. However, both sacrificed their life at Prayag.

The children were left to their fate whereas the parents had faith in God who would take care of them as He did of the whole universe. They were now orphans. Nivrutti (1273-1299) was ten, Jnandev (1275-1296) was eight, Sopan (1277-1297) was six and Muktabai (1279-1298) was four. The dates in the bracket are tentative and are based on Deshpande's information: "Within duration of not more than twenty-five years, these extraordinary children came and went away, leaving an imprint on the life and culture of Maharashtra, which time can never efface."

Nivrutti being eldest took care of his siblings very well. He went round Alandi, gathered bhiksha, and fed them. Besides, he educated them as best as he could. Jnaneshwar began to show his brilliance. He considered his elder brother, as his Guru but Nivrutti did not fail to recognize his younger brother's genius. He allowed him to develop his spiritual faculties without any hindrance. Jnandev suggested to his brothers that we take up the matter of sacred thread ceremony with the elders who had made our parents to sacrifice their life for us. Nivrutti and Sopan hesitated for a while but then agreed. They went to the elders of Alandi and spoke to them. The elders suggested to them to go to Paithan and obtain 'sudhi-patrak' (parchment of purification) from the highest religious authority of their community. They went there and stayed in the home of Krishnaji Devkule, the brother of their grandmother Nirai. After four days, the elders assembled to decide the fate of the children. Jnandev, who was the spokesperson for all the four of them, supposed to have said in the words of Deshpande: "You, the revered custodians of Dharma (the cosmic order governing human destiny), condemned our father to a lifelong excommunication and held him up before society as one guilty of the worst kind of sin (pap). He accepted your verdict and led a life of an outcast and an outsider without self-condemnation or self-justification. And, having undergone this severe punishment, he pleaded, not for himself but for us, for our readmission to the religio-social order. You, custodians of religion demanded the further price, the price of his precious life to atone for his so-called sin. He paid that price also, and now, when we plead for our readmission, you are still hesitant. Is this consistent with truth, for which, the Dharma stands?" They went over the scriptures once again and found no way. However, they could not brush aside Jnandev's truthful words. To find the way out, 'they demanded from this amazingly brilliant boy a proof of the purity of the lives of all the four children ... when so provoked, Jnandev spontaneously asked: "Name it and I will, by the grace of God, do it." And they pointed to a passing he-buffalo...' Jnandev said: "It has the same soul as mine." It is said that Jnandev performed the miracles they demanded. They were stunned and gave the 'sudhi-patrak' to Nivrutti but with an added condition: all the four should not marry. Nivrutti bowed to them and accepted the Parchment of Purity. They returned to their father's maternal uncle Devkule's home and stayed in Paithan for three long years to study ancient scriptures in the various schools there. According to Vinoba Bhave, Jnandev was familiar with Upanisads, Yoga-sutra, Shankracharya and Ramanujacharya's works, Yoga-vasist, Mahabharat and other works.

After the completion of their studies, all the four departed for their home in Alandi. On the way, they stopped at a place called Ale, where the he-buffalo, which was pointed out to them, and which they had taken as a companion, died. During their travel, all the time, Jnandev was thinking about the sublimity of the scriptures, he had learnt in Paithan and the false interpretation the custodians of Dharma did. He discussed this matter with his elder brother and Guru. When they reached Nevase on the bank of the river Pravara near Ahamadnagar, his Guru Nivrutti asked Jnandev to expound Gita before the audience who gathered there to see them. There, for many days, Jnandev gave discourse on Gita and a person called Baba Sachidanand took it down. Once the exposition of Gita was over, they resumed their journey and reached Alandi. The people of Alandi received them now with fanfare because they made their village or town famous. Even then, in Alandi, there was Visoba Chati who harbored enmity with them. He too came round when he saw some miracle of Jnandev. Here Jnandev wrote one more book and then they decided to go on a pilgrimage of India.

In the year 1291, Jnandev with his brothers and sister walked out of Alandi and arrived at Chakan. Mahipatrao, an elder of Chakan received them cordially. They became his guests. On their departure from Chakan, Mahiparao requested them to visit his daughter Sita and her husband Ramrai in Kahad. They simply smiled because they knew that Ramrai did not like the devotees of God. From Chakan, they arrived in Pandhapur. Here, they met many saints, which included Namdev and Chokhamela. They took Namdev along with them. Chokhamela and others walked with them for a short distance and then bade them goodbye.

From Pandharpur, they arrived in Kahad. Sita was there to greet them. However, she did not know how to take them home without the consent of her husband. An incident opened the eyes of Ramrai and he bowed down to Jnandev and took them home. Sita was happy to receive them cordially. From Kahad, they arrived at the village called Tergaon, where the saint Gora Kumbhar lived. Gora was very happy to receive them all. He took them home and in the evening, they sang kirtan together. We skip the incident, which took place in Gora's house and displeased Namdev because we have already narrated it earlier in Namdev's biography. From Tergaon onward the going was to become difficult. Now they faced the formidable ranges of Satpuda and Vindhya mountains. Here a Bhil tribal, Harpal, escorted them through dense forests. He accompanied them right up to Dhar. In Dhar, Jnandev helped the son of Kamlakar Bhat to recover from snakebite. From Dhar, they arrived in Ujjain. Here they witnessed Vir Mangal taking his 'samadhi'. Jnandev constructed a Shivling at the very spot where Vir Mangal took samadhi. It is known today as Mangaleshwar Shivling. In this manner, they were moving forward, resting wherever they found suitable place to stay. Finally, they arrived at Prayag where Vithalpant and Rukmini sacrificed their life. What might have passed through the heart of their children, we have no words to describe. They might have bathed there to drown their sorrows. Kashi, the most ancient and the most renowned Centre of Learning, was their final destination. When they arrived in the city, Mrudgalacharya was performing the sacred rite called 'Yajna' at Manikarnika Ghat. The question arose then was who should be honored first among all the learned men who had assembled there. Jnaneshwar was chosen for the honor and he was garlanded.

After a few days' stay in Kashi, Jnandev and his co-pilgrims began their return journey. During their return journey, they passed through Ayodhya, Mathura, Gokul-Vrindavan, Pushkar, Dwarka and many other places. They once again crossed the ranges of Vindhya and Satpuda mountains and arrived in Maharashtra. They went to Pandharpur and dropped Namdev. Then, they reached home in Alandi.

Jnandev was now known all over India. A Yogi, called Changdev, heard of him. He wanted to meet him. He took a paper and pen to write a letter to him but did not know how to address a boy in his teens. He simply sent a blank letter to Jnandev, which was delivered to him in Alandi by one of the disciples of Changdev. When Jnandev opened the letter, it was a blank paper. He was surprised. He showed the letter to his brothers and sister. Mukta simply exclaimed: "Look at this great Yogi who remained as blank as this piece of paper, despite his so-called 'sadhana' and 'tap' extending over fourteen and hundred (114) years (chaudse vars tap karun punha ha koracha korach rahilo aha)."

Nivrutti asked Jnandev to write an appropriate and a decent letter to Changdev. Jnandev wrote 'Changdev pasashti' and sent it through the same disciple who was waiting for the reply for his master. Changdev could not understand the high philosophy written in the letter. He decided to meet Jnandev personally and get the clarification. He set out from his Ashram with pomp and pageantry befitting a great Yogi. When he met Jnandev, he found a boy so learned and so gentle that he felt awkward. Anyway, he asked Jnandev to explain him the letter. Jnandev said that the letter is not at all difficult and his sister Mukta would explain it much better than he did. Mukta, a girl in her teens, explained the letter to the old Changdev. Later, Changdev considered Mukta as his Guru.

Jnandev had completed now 20 years of his life. Within a span of five years (15 to 20), he had written three monumental works—Bhavarth Dipika, Amrutanubhav, Changdev Pasashti—and Haripath for the masses. He soon discovered that the people admired Jnaneshwari for its beautiful language. They missed its core. The other two books, Amrutanubhav and Changdev Pasashti were beyond their grasp. He felt that what he had written during his life were not mere words but truth. That truth needed to be demonstrated in the actual life. That is, the soul could fly off, as a free bird at one's sweet will. He told Nivrutti, his elder brother and Guru, that he would like to take 'samadhi'. We read this last event of his life in the words of his biographer Deshpande.

"Jnanadeva perhaps anticipated the objections that would continue to be raised from generation to generation to what he has recorded in his 'Experience Immortal' [Amrutanubhav]. He, therefore; announced, to the utter amazement of all, that he had decided to fly away from his body, as a bird flies away from its temporary perch. This extraordinary announcement startled all his friends." "... in the twenty first year of his life Jnanadeva, by his own free will, entered 'Mahasamadhi' in the presence of his two brothers

and sister and a large number of friends and admirers.” “Namadeva graphically describes the scene as to how a cave was dug out near the shrine of Siddheshwar [Temple] at Alandi, and how Jnanadeva entered it, sat cross-legged, [closed his eyes] and went into a Samadhi, and how the Bird of Being flew away on his two wings—the wing of Life and the wing of Death. ‘Experience Immortal’ no longer remained mere matter of words. The word and the Bird of Being became the ‘One without the other’ Experiencing became Immortal without the experiencer. Everything vanished into the ever-present Radiant Reality.” “All this happened in the presence of Namadeva and many other saints who were present on the occasion.” This happened on October 25, 1296.

Many shed tears witnessing this unusual incident. Namdev, even being a saint, wept. He wrote: “Who can ever know the agony I experienced? Love melted into a flood of tears flowing from my eyes. Words refused to disturb the immensity of silence. I saw my own Life flying away. ... He was the boundless ocean of experiencing, full of mystic Reality. He was the secret reality of Adhyatma become manifest in his audible words. His message told humanity what to do and what not to do. His fame shines in all the three worlds. He proved beyond doubt that immortality was a simple thing that inheres in the Awareness of Man ... Jnanadeva vanished into Samadhi and became one with Brahma (Reality). (It was as though Reality appeared and disappeared from our view, without being affected by either appearance or disappearance).”

We do not know the effect of this Samadhi on Jnandev's brothers and sister. Perhaps, Sopan felt it much because he took his Samadhi only a year after that of Jnandev. We record here the life of Nivrutti and Muktabai very briefly because they were part of Jnandev's life.

**Muktabai:** She was about sixteen when Jnandev took Samadhi. She loved her brothers deeply. In turn, she was the darling of her brothers. She respected her brothers as her elders but she had an independent mind and she lived with them as an equal. We note an incident here, which testifies to it, and is recorded by Deshpande. “When Nivrutti asked Mukta to pay homage to Namadeva, she burst out, saying. ‘I shall not bend before an egotist. He is like a sandal tree, naturally fragrant, but encircled by the deadly snake of egoism. It is astounding that he, who lives so near to God and in such intimate relationship with Him, should not have been able to liquidate his ego.’” Ruth Vanita too has noted Muktabai's independent mind. She wrote in Manushi (Tenth Anniversary Issue): “Over 100 abhangs are extant attributed to Muktabai. Unlike many other women bhaktas, she does not emphasize her womanhood or dwell on the condition of her life as a woman. Many songs are cast in the form of dialogues with other sants, and in these, she discourses with them as an equal. For example, in ‘Nivritti Mukti Samvad’, she and Nivritti instruct one another. In ‘Tatiche Abhang’ (Song of the Door), Mukta tries to persuade Jnaneshwar, who had gotten annoyed by people's comments and locked himself in his hut, to open the door. She adopts the tone not of a younger sister pleading with an older brother but of one sant addressing another.” We now read the gist of ‘Tatiche Abhang’, which consists of eleven parts. “Have mercy on me and open the door, please. Endure the taunts of the worldly-wise people, as they would make you a saint. Those who are not proud are great. In addition, great people are always kind to every one. Moreover, with whom would you be angry? Will you be angry with yourself? When the same Brahm resides in everyone's heart—who can chide whom? Take a balanced view and open the door, my brother,” (the author's name for English version is not known to me).

“Mukta is said to have surpassed many sages in wisdom. ... In many of his songs, Changdev refers to her as his Guru.” In short, she was a ‘spiritually advanced and a learned yogini.’ She took her Samadhi, like her two brothers, at the age of 18.

**Nivruttinath:** Words fail to describe his life. He was a boy of ten when he voluntarily took upon himself to discharge the parental duties. How magnificently did he discharge his duties! He made what his brothers and sister were. They have left magnificent legacy. He was initiated, as noted earlier, by Gahininatha. He in turn, initiated his brothers and sister or he initiated Jnandev, who later initiated Sopan and Mukta. His life was simply exemplary. When all his siblings took Samadhi, he had no more duty to perform. He was last to take his Samadhi at the age of 25. Thus, a great lineage ended.

## LEGENDS

There are many legends and miracles associated with Jnandev. We note some important ones.

- A he-buffalo was whipped. The marks and bleeding wounds on the animal's back appeared on the back of Jnandev at the same time.
- Jnandev made a he-buffalo to recite the verses of Veda by just putting his hand on the animal.
- He performed a ritual called 'Sradha' for a poor family and the ancestors of the man arrived for the feast.
- In Nevase, he touched a dead man and he came to life. In Dhar, he did the same.
- Jnandev made his back so hot that Mukta baked the 'rotis' (a kind of bread) on the back of Jnandev.
- Jnandev and his brothers and sister were sitting on a wall of a dilapidated house and they heard of Changdev's arrival in Alandi. Jnandev asked the wall to move quickly and reach the place where Changdev was. The wall did as was instructed. Changdev was stunned to see Jnandev's miracle. He was humbled and touched Jnandev's feet.

## WORKS

**Bhavarth Dipika (Inner essence of Gita) or Jnaneshwari (Divine Wisdom):** This book is a wonderful commentary on Gita. Actually, it is an original work, more than a mere commentary. It consists of 9032 'Ovis' ('an Ovi is a metrical form, very flexible and rhythmic, carrying with the effortless flow the graces of prose as well as poetry' (Deshpande)). The original Sanskrit Gita is a remarkable work on Yoga. The question is posed: Who is a true Yogi? Krishna says: "Among the Yogis the one who, through Yoga, becomes one with me (God), and remains always aware of my presence within his being, is most dear to me."

Jnandev, in his Jnaneshwari, says: "Such a Yogi is the God of all gods. He is the very bliss of all forms of happiness that inheres in God. He is chaitanya itself (Life of all forms of life). In this Yogic state of being, the lover, the beloved and Love, all become integrated into a unique wholeness, which shines through the Yogi. There then remains no difference between him and God. Such union cannot be described in words. The only simile that comes nearest to it is to say that I am the body and he is my Atma."

Jnandev says at one place in his Jnaneshwari: "My language is Marathi, the language of the commoners (unlike the Sanskrit said to be the language of the Gods). But the attentive listeners will find that the sweetness of these simple Marathi words surpasses the elixir from the heavens ... This, indeed, is a banquet in which words become the most delicious dishes suffused with the elixir of freedom, which carries with it the extraordinary quality of penetrating into the innermost core of all beings. But only those listeners will get the best out of these dishes, who know the art of sitting quietly with the inner flame of self-awareness, and of consuming the delicacies spread out before them so stealthily as not to arouse the senses from their blissful repose."

Jnandev concludes his Jnaneshwari with the following words: "Let these God-intoxicated men be near and dear relatives of all men because their very contact generates goodness in all hearts at all times. They are like the moon without its blemish and like the sun shorn of its burning power ... Let all the three worlds be one perfect Kingdom of Happiness and let all men be charged with the yearning for constant awareness of Adi-Purush—the Original One, dwelling in the hearts of all beings."

**Anubhavamruta (Experience Immortal) or Amrutanubhava (The Nectar of Experience):** This work consists of 804 Ovis. It is a small mystic work highly philosophic in content. Jnandev says of it: "I talk of my experience immortal, the mature end-product of all my experiences. The experiences of all men—the liberated, the non-liberated, and the ones aspiring for liberation—are in essence of one and the same significance. The differences persist only till the moment of maturity when one begins to taste the nectar underlying the mystery of experiencing. And this is the natural destiny of all men. It is like the bloom of youth that resides in every young woman; it bursts forth in blossoms only when she unites with her beloved. Or, it is like the trees in which the capacity to flower and explode into fruits is always there; but it is only when spring comes that this capacity rushes forth through all the

branches that then rises up to kiss the sky... So also all men (irrespective of any differences during the stages of immaturity) can taste the sweetness of this nectar of my experience ('The Experience Immortal') if they care to go deep into the very heart of these words and see, face to face, the shrine within. If they do so, the river of the energy of their beings will rush forth like a torrent to meet the Ocean of Life, as the natural rivers in flood rush to meet the high seas. And when this happens they will realize that there is nothing else in this immense universe—organic or inorganic—that remains outside the sweep of this 'Experience Immortal'."

**Changdev Pasahti:** It is a work of only 65 Ovis. Actually, these Ovis are in letterform written to Changdev. We read a few of them to see the content: "O, dear Changa, how I wish I have neither to do nor not do anything for your sake. But out of love, my 'I-ness' becomes irrepressible for the time being. Soon, however, as I see you in your existential identity (your Atma), my 'I-ness' vanishes in your existential identity (your Atma), my 'I-ness' vanishes into non-being and, along with it, your 'you-ness' vanishes into nothingness. 'I' and 'You' are lost in the union of our existential identities ... I, Jnandev, have woven this garland of letters in a state of being, which is like the sleep beyond the slumber of beings and also like the eternal wakefulness that has devoured the ordinary wakefulness of beings."

## **WARKARI SAMPRADAYA**

Jnandev, along with Namdev, is the founder of Warkari Sampradaya. Warkaris recite their favorite rhyme, which runs as follows: 'Nivrutti, Jnandev, Sopan, Muktabai, Aknath, Namdev, Tukaram.' They sing the bhajans or abhangs of these saints. Once, in a year, they go to Pandharpur. Many of them prefer to walk down singing along the way the abhangs of these saints. This way, through them, the works of Jnandev and Namdev have survived for almost 700 years.

## **JNANDEV AND NAMDEV**

Namdev was a senior contemporary of Jnandev. Namdev adored Jnandev. We read his tribute, which he gave to Jnandev: "Jnanaraj (Jnanadeva, the Lord of Wisdom) is to me like Yogamata (Mother Yoga). It is through his grace that a man as ignorant as me received all the knowledge of the self. He lighted the flame of Life Eternal for me by explaining to me the secrets of Adhyatma-Vidya (Esoteric knowledge). He untied all the knots of my ego and brought me face to face with Reality. His wondrous work on the Gita in Marathi has cleared the way for all people eager to know Truth or God. This is a clear evidence of his great compassion for all men, all over the world. His 'Jnanadeva' is so full of real knowledge that those who care to understand even one stanza of it, every day, will soon find themselves initiated into the mystery that is life."

This tribute shows in what esteem Jnanandev was held by the saints of his times.

## **VINOBA BHAVE ON JNANDEV**

At a very young age, Vinoba Bhave chose Jnandev, along with Shankracharya, as his Guru. We read his comments on him.

- I have no words to express my gratitude to Jnandev. In Maharashtra, Jnandev is known as 'Jnaneshwar Mauli' (Mother Jnaneshwar). Even today, his name moves millions.
- In whole Jnaneshwari, we would not find any harsh word. He uses gentle words, which shows his own gentleness. Christ, Tolstoy and Tukaram also were very gentle; yet, we can find some lapses in them, but not in Jnaneshwar. From his mouth harsh word never escaped. In Jnandev's language, there is 'somyata' (gentleness) and 'mruduta' (softness).
- Jnandev was a Yogi. So was Gorakhnath. Gorakhnath was a 'Sunnyawadi'; Jnandev was a 'Purnawadi'. Jnandev also belonged to the Nath Sampradaya. Why did Jnandev take samadhi? Didn't he like to live long? The answer to this is: he had reached his fullness. Hence, he took samadhi.
- There are about a thousand bhajans in the name of Jnandev. It cannot be said that all are composed by him. Jnaneshwari is the finest ornament of the Marathi language. It is the supreme support or pillar of Marathi language. Marathi language – Jnaneshwari = 0. Jnandev said: "The method by which artisans created their art-works in caves, that way I

have created an art-work in the Gita.” Jnaneshwari and Aknath’s Bhagwat are two unique works. The language of Jnaneshwari is so simple that its explanation in prose becomes more difficult. However, the language is archaic and the explanation in modern Marathi prose is necessary.

- Namdev followed Jnaneshwar’s style in his works. Aknath, Ramdas and Tukaram also took Jnandev’s style. The beginning of the Marathi language is found in Jnaneshwari. This is a great thing for Maharashtra. Jnandev showed that sacred works could be written in Marathi also—not only in Sanskrit. His style was not that of destructive criticism.
- In Amrutanubhav, Jnandev has tried to accumulate the nectar (amrut) in words. At least, there is no comparable work in the Marathi language. Some people say that whatever literary flourish is seen in Jnaneshwari is not seen in Amrutanubhav. Vinoba says it is true. In Jnaneshwar it is seen and in Amrutanubhav it is there but not seen. Jnaneshwar has written in Amrutanubhav on the topic of Dyan Marg (path to meditation). It stresses the point made by Buddha. Buddha said: “Everyone should accept my views only after having examined it fully. Amrutanubhav says the same thing in a different idiom in a different language like Marathi.

In writing the biography of Jnandev, I have relied on P. Y. Deshpande’s book Jnanadeva, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi and on the works of Vinoba Bhave.

### **AKNATH (1533-1599)**

Aknath, according to Vinoba, was the most self-effacing saint of Maharashtra. He was the link between the saints of the past and those saints, who came after him in Maharashtra. He located the place where Jnandev took Samadhi and cleared the wild growth, which had covered it. Once again, the devotees began to visit with ease the Samadhi of their beloved saint and expressed their respect to the great-departed soul. Aknath also collected several manuscripts of Jnaneshwari and edited it in order to cleanse the corrupted text due to spurious addition that had taken place over the centuries. This way he paid his tribute to Jnandev—his Aradhya Dev (God chosen for worship)—and rendered valuable service to the Warkari Sampradaya. The great Marathi poet Moropant (1729-1794) said in his tribute to Aknath: “You are great among the kindly persons. You have genuine concern for the poor. You took up in your lap an untouchable child. The way, you have emancipated millions of people, that way, you emancipate me.” According to Vinoba, Aknath has also influenced Justice Madhav Govind Ranade (1842-1901) very much. Vinoba also said: If Tukaram is a high watermark among bhaktas, then Jnandev is a high watermark among the men of Learning. In this respect, Aknath is a ‘Sadhu’ (a very good and a profound man). He was a gentleman—peaceful, clean and the finest of citizens. This way, Nath was the only Nath. Tukaram (1608-1650) says that he is under infinite debt of Aknath. Tukaram had read Aknath’s works many times. Aknath says that he is a singer of Jnandev’s Ovis. Whatever he has is of Jnandev. This shows Aknath extreme humility. We recount here the life of this humble saint after we put down his bio data.

### **BIODATA**

Name: Aknath

Birth Place: Paithan

Birth date: Some time in 1533

Mother’s name: Rukmini

Father’s name: Suryanarayan

School: A Pandit educated him at home

Works: Aknathi Bhagwat (magnum opus), Rukmini Swayamvar, Chiranjiv Pad, Bhavarth Ramayan and Haripath

Death Place: Paithan

Death date: Some time in 1599

### **LIFE**

Aknath was born in a well-to-do family and his life went on smoothly. His great grandfather, Bhanudas, was a great devotee of Vithoba of Pandharpur and a man of high standing in Paithan. During the Muslim pillage of temples and idols, the idol of Vithoba was removed from Pandharpur and was taken to the Vijaynagram Kingdom for safety. Bhanudas

convinced the king Krishnaraj of Vijaynagram that it was now safe to restore the Vithoba idol in the Pandharpur Temple and the people of Pandhapur were in a position to take care of it. The king was convinced and the idol was reinstalled in its original place. From this incident, we get some idea of Bhanudas' benign personality. Bhanudas died in 1513 at the age of 65. Twenty years later, Aknath was born in Paithan (Aurangabad District, Maharashtra) but he lost both of his parents in his early childhood. His grandfather, Chakrapani, and his grandmother brought him up very lovingly and his childhood passed happily. He might have heard a lot about his great grandfather from his grandfather and this might have inspired him much. His birthplace might have inspired him also because it has a history of 2000 years. It is a home of many great men. All these favorable circumstances might have helped him much in his development. At the age of six, his family priest performed the sacred thread ceremony and he was given to wear the sacred thread. His education too began under the same Pandit at the same time. He was a brilliant student and he finished his scriptural studies by the age of 12. Now he was in search of a Guru, who could lead him to self-realization. He chose sant Janardan Swami of Devgiri or Devgad. Perhaps he was afraid that his grandparents would not allow him to go to a distant place at his tender age. Hence, he went to Devgad without telling them of his departure. In Devgad, he met the Swami, who received him warmly. Janardan Swami was pleased to see a boy of 12, who was so eager to progress in his spiritual quest. He accepted him as his disciple.

Janardan Swami was originally a resident of Chalisgaon. There, he was in the administrative service of some kind and had the designation of Deshpande. He later moved to Devgad and joined in its administrative service. He soon rose in the service and became the Governor of Devgad. In spite of his high office, he was known to all as a saint (sant). He was a pious man and an ardent devotee of Dattareya and belonged to the Datta Sampradaya. Aknath, on the other hand, belonged to the Warkari Sampradaya. In spite of these differences, the Swami was great and broad enough to accept Aknath as his disciple. Aknath on his part was a devoted student and did not spare himself in attending to his duties as a student. He studied under him for a long time and attained self-realization. On the completion of his studies, Janardan Swami blessed him and gave him the following advice. You remain true to your Warkari Sampradaya. You lead a householder's life.

After taking the leave of his Guru, Aknath embarked on a long pilgrimage, visiting all the important shrines of India. On his way to Rameshwaram, he came across a donkey that had fallen down on the ground because of thirst and exhaustion. He revived the donkey by offering the water of the river Ganges, which he was carrying with him to offer the God at Rameshwaram. When his co-pilgrims came to know what Aknath did, they scolded him. Aknath quoted scriptures to pacify them. This shows Aknath's compassion for all creatures.

After the completion of his long pilgrimages, Aknath returned home and met his grandparents. They were very happy. They wanted him to marry and settle down at home. Aknath remembered his Guru's advice and he married a saintly girl Girijadevi. His wife had all the virtues he had and their life was very happy. Aknath's main occupation was to recite scriptures before the devotees who assembled in his house and his wife served them food. They did not discriminate the devotees because of their caste or gender. The untouchables too were welcomed in their house and they too were served food. This way, they lived happily. Their children too were noble. Their son, Hari Pandit, distinguished himself as a Sanskrit scholar. Their daughter Godavari's son Mukteshwar, even today, is ranked among the great poets of the Marathi language. He began to write Mahabharat in the Marathi 'Ovi' meter but could complete only four chapters. These four chapters were enough to show his creative ability. Later, the renowned Marathi poet, Moropant, edited Mukteshwar's incomplete work and completed the full Mahabharat. This shows that Aknath and his wife Girijadevi led an even life free from many vicissitudes. No doubt, there were a few unpleasant incidences and we will narrate them later because we do not know the chronological order of these events. For the present, we look at Aknath's works. At this point, we should note that Aknath selected his pen name as Jani Janardan to express his gratitude to his Guru. The pen name has a beautiful meaning: "In man lives the God Janardan." This pen name itself shows his self-effacing temperament.

Aknath's famous work is Aknathi Bhagvat. When he began to write it we do not know but his first five chapters were written in Paithan. The remaining chapters were written in Kashi and the work was completed there in the year 1573. The amazing fact is this: Tulsidas and Aknath were contemporary residents of Kashi. Tulsidas was born in 1532; Aknath was

born in 1533. Tulsidas completed his Ram-Charit-Manas in 1574; Aknath completed his Bhagvat in 1573. Vinoba Bhave said both were sitting on the bank of the river Ganga and writing their works at the same time without knowing each other. Both wrote outstanding work—Tulsi wrote immortal Ramayan, Aknath wrote immortal Bhagvat. Aknath also wrote Rukmini Swayamvar in Kashi.

When Aknath returned to Paithan we do not know but his Guru, Janardan Swami, died in Devgadhi in 1575. His mausoleum (samadhi) is still extant in Devgadhi (now Daultabad).

Another work of Aknath is Bhavarth Ramayan. According to Vinoba Bhave, it is incomplete but it is good. When Aknath wrote his Ramayan we do not know but in 1584, he undertook the task of editing Jnaneshwari. How long he took to complete the work we do not know but it seems that his later life was devoted to keep the memory of Jnaneshwar alive.

Aknath was very fortunate in having a domestic servant in Shrikhandiya. He took great care of all the members of his household. This freed Aknath from his domestic work considerably. It is said that Shrikhandiya was none else but God himself who served his devotee and disappeared the moment Aknath realized it. Perhaps, this is the only legend associated with Aknath who had no need of legends in his even life.

In 1599, Aknath and his wife Girijadevi took Jalsamadhi in the river Godavari in the presence of all his devotees and admirers. According to Vinoba Bhave, he told the assembled people: "I am taking leave of you all. My work is over. I am going to God's place. Today, I want to go; bid me farewell." Then he walked down with his wife in the waters of the river Godawari.

#### **SOME EVENTS IN AKNATH'S LIFE**

There was an untouchable devotee called Raniya. He wanted Aknath to visit his home and take dinner with him. Aknath gladly went to his house and took meals with him. This disturbed the orthodox people but Aknath told them: "He is an untouchable but is there anyone here who has attained his spiritual level?" This way he silenced them.

Once, Aknath and his wife had invited Brahmins to their house for dinner. They had prepared nice delicacies. A few untouchables were passing by their house. They stood near the house to taste the sweet smell. Aknath noticed them. He at once invited them. His wife told her husband to invite their families also. They fed all these persons and prepared again the delicacies for the invited guests.

Everyday people came to hear Aknath's exposition of scriptures. They sat for hours. An idea came to Aknath. He felt that these people came and spent their time in hearing him, hence, he should give them something in return for his taking away their time. He thought that he gave a little 'prasad' (sacred food) for their sacrifice. Thus, the next day he increased the 'prasad' many fold. Now regular audience came as usual but a large number of people only came for 'prasad'. This way some took advantage of his kindness. One day a fellow went to sleep in his bed. Aknath did not wake him up and let him sleep for the whole night. The next day, he gave him dinner and let him go. The saying: 'Empty stomach knows no religion' Aknath understood it well. He linked food with bhajan. Thereby he taught the teaching of Bhagvat to the people.

A Muslim fellow, perhaps, hated Aknath. Whenever Aknath came out of the river Godavari, after finishing his bath, this man would spit upon him. Thus, he had to go back to take his bath. This way, once, he had to take his bath 108 times. People asked him: Why should he tolerate such a man? Aknath answered: You take bath once a day. This man helps Aknath to take bath more than once. When the fellow heard this, he felt ashamed, came to Aknath, and tendered his apology.

Once, thieves entered his house. He welcomed them and told them to take away whatever they want. He woke up his wife and asked her to prepare dinner. He fed the thieves and lovingly bade them good-bye.

There are many such instances and there would not be any end to it if we go on.

## WORKS

Aknath's first work was Chatushloki Bhagvat, which consists of 1,036 Ovis. His Guru, to give him advanced training, suggested to him to base his work on the certain shlokas of the original Sanskrit Bhagvat and write the said Bhagvat. Aknath also wrote Rukmini Swayamvar consisting of 1,711 Ovis. This work was based on 144 shlokas of the Bhagvat Puran. Shankracharya had written a Sanskrit hymn called Hastamalak comprising some 14 shlokas. Aknath wrote his work with same name; it contained 764 Ovis. Aknath's magnum opus is Aknathi Bhagvat and his fame rests on this work alone. It consists of 18846 Ovis. Another good work of his is Bhavarth Ramayan. He could write only 25,000 Ovis of it. His disciple wrote the remaining 15,000 Ovis and completed the 40,000 Ovis full Ramayan. Aknath wrote many more books and these are: Shukshatak (447 Ovis), Swatma-Sukha (510 Ovis), Anand-Lahari (154 Ovis), Chiranjiv-Pad (42 Ovis), Gita Sar, Prahlad Vijay and some 300 abhangs.

## VINOBA'S COMMENTS ON AKNATH

In India, as well as, in Maharashtra, many remarkable men were born. Aknath has to be counted among them. Assume that in human body Bhagvat's wisdom was born. Aknath's Bhagvat is no doubt great; even then, his life is greater than his works. His discussion on 'Akadash Skanth' (eleventh chapter) is not found in any other language. His Bhagvat is easy to understand, the language is fluid. Aknath says: "I have followed Shridhar." Shridhar would say: "Because of Aknath, I became immortal." Aknath's ideal was: Speech is pure only because of Truth otherwise whole poetry is inauspicious. Aknath's other works are there. They are all good but in them, the magic of Bhagvat is not there. He had a group of 'kirtankars' (singers of kirtans) who sang kirtans before his audience.

Aknath was not imposing his ideas on others. He did not want to change others. This was not his principle. His principle was to serve others and thereby wanted his own purification. The gist of one of the bhajans of Aknath is: Sugar is seen but sweetness is not seen. Then does it mean they are separate? So is God in man. To realize Him give up pride.

Aknath took bhakti-vision of Jnandev. In turn, he made it very simple within the reach of ordinary people. Jnandev was like Kapilmuni, an inborn genius, whereas Aknath was a householder and developed slowly. Namdev was Jnandev's canvasser. Aknath was his expositor.

The main mantra of Warkari Sampradaya is: Ram Krishna Hari. Aknath coined it. Aknath is the teacher. The main word for God is Dev, which Aknath used it so often and that word has become household word in Maharashtra.

The final assessment of Vinoba, after examining life and works of Aknath, is: Aknath was a great non-violent saint.

## TUKARAM (1608-1650)

Tukaram is the most popular saint of Maharashtra. Whatever standing Tulsidas has in the Hindi-speaking regions of India, the same standing Tukaram has in Maharashtra. The Marathi poet Moropant said of Tukaram: "Without Tukaram's abhang any Hari-katha in Maharashtra does not end. Tukaram taught bhakti to many dull people." Many saints wrote abhangs along with other writings but Tukaram wrote nothing but abhangs, hence, the word abhang was attached with Tukaram's name. Tukaram became bhakta after going through very harsh experiences in life. He has written his autobiography not in prose but in his abhangs. In his collected work, it runs from 27<sup>th</sup> abhang to 120<sup>th</sup> abhang. In spite of this fact, we do not know his exact birth date or where and when he died.

## BIODATA

Name: Tukaram  
Birth Place: Dehu near Poona  
Birth date: sometime in 1608 (tentative)  
Mother's name: Kanakai  
Father's name: Bolhoba Moray

School: Learnt business from his father  
Works: Tukaram Gatha, collection of 4,500 abhangs  
Death Place: Dehu  
Death date: some time in 1650

## LIFE

Tukaram was born in a village called Dehu, which is some 25 to 30 km away from the famous city of Poona. Dehu is situated on the bank of the river Indrayani and the mountains of Bhamnath and Bhandara are not very far away from it. His parents belonged to the Warkari Sampradaya and were ardent devotees of Vithoba of Pandharpur. His father was a small trader and his mother came from one Moze family of the village Lone, which is close to Poona. His all ancestors were not traders but peasants called Kunbi. Some eight generation back, an ancestor, named Vishvambhar, built the Vithal Temple in Dehu. Because of this Tukaram's family enjoyed good reputation in the village even though the temple remained in a dilapidated condition then. The family business was going on well and they were well placed. Tukaram had two elder brothers. Savji was the eldest brother and Kahanji was the elder brother. The father was anxious to retire and devote his time in the worship of Vithoba. He tried to train Savji in his business but failed. Savji too wanted to devote his time in the worship of Vithoba. For this reason the father began to train his youngest favorite son Tukaram in his business and placed all hopes on him. Tukaram learnt the art of trade soon and he did very well. The family business began to flourish and they were getting rich.

The parents now thought of arranging marriage of their sons. To economize on expenses, all the brothers were married at the same time. Some say that Tukaram was married at the age of 12; others say that he was married at the age of 15. Whatever might be the fact, Tukaram's wife, Rakhumabai, was not keeping good health from the very beginning and he was married again to Jijabai, the daughter of a wealthy merchant of Poona. Jijabai was temperamental and very harsh of tongue. Tukaram and Jijabai had three sons, Santu or Mahadev, Vithoba and Narayan.

Tukaram's business flourished for several years and his parents too were happy to see his son well settled. The good days passed soon. All of a sudden, Tukaram lost his both parents and the wife of his elder brother. Savji was shocked and lost all interest in life. After sometime he left home and went on a long pilgrimage. Now all the family responsibility fell upon Tukaram, who was very young. He could not attend on his business enough. Those who bought goods on credit were not paying him in time and some declared them as bankrupt. Tukaram's business collapsed and he incurred heavy debts. He became insolvent and his property was sold. What remained with him were his house and some fields. Soon after, the region suffered from famine and Tukaram's first wife and the eldest son died of starvation. This broke Tukaram completely. His relatives and friends tried to resettle him again but he had no heart in it. Once his wife gave him rupees 200 and sent him to do business. He did well and was returning home with rupees 250. On the way, he met a man in desperately need of money. He gave him rupees 250, came home without money, and told his story to his wife. His wife became angry and treated him very harshly. Tukaram was tired and was spending more time in singing the abhangs of saints.

One day he asked his son to bring all the books of account. In these books, along with signed documents, all the names were there from whom he had to recover money. He decided to throw all this material in the river. He began his journey to the Indrayani River with his bundle of books. His son informed his uncle. Kahanji ran after his brother and reminded him of his share. Tukaram gave the bundle to his brother and told him to take away whatever he thought of his share. His brother took his share and the remaining bundle he gave back to his brother. Tukaram threw that bundle in the river, freed himself from the domestic worries, and surrendered himself to God.

Tukaram mostly spent his time in contemplation on the riverbed of Indrayini or went to the nearby mountains. He did self-introspection also. He remembered the deeds of his ancestors. He was unhappy to see the dilapidated condition of the Vithal Temple his ancestor had built. He decided to repair it. It is said that he began to gather stones from the surrounding areas and brought it to the temple and single handedly repaired it. He began to read Namdev's abhangs. Later he read Aknath's Bhagvat and Jnandev's Jnaneshwari. This self-study broadened his worldview. Once, in a dream, Namdev came and told him to

compose his own abhangs. He began to compose his own abhangs and began to sing them. People flocked to him to hear his beautiful abhangs. His fame spread in the surrounding areas and many people, including Shivaji, came to Dehu to hear him. In spite of his fame, Tukaram was unhappy because he hadn't found a Guru. Once again, in a dream, Baba Chaitanaya came and gave him a mantra 'Ram Krishna Hari'. He was now fully satisfied with his spiritual life and spent rest of his life in singing his abhangs and gathering people round him, who joined him in singing. He never made any persons his disciples. They simply joined him. Being a saint, some people did harass him occasionally. We would recount a few nasty incidents a little later. He died in 1650 at the age of 42. We do not know exactly where and when he died. Most of the scholars agree that he died sometime in 1650.

## **LEGENDS**

A Sanskrit scholar, Rameshwar Pandit, was not happy to see Tukaram's fame. He instigated an administrative officer of Dehu to order Tukaram to throw away his abhangs in the river Indrayani. Tukaram pleaded with both the men to allow him to retain his manuscript of abhangs but they did not agree. He was made to throw the manuscript in the river. Tukaram set in the riverbed for days, sang his newly composed abhangs, and thereby addressed God his predicament of not allowing him to sing his glory. God himself came down to the river, found the manuscript from the river and returned it to Tukaram personally. God punished Rameshwar. He became so ill that doctors could not cure him. Only by the grace of Tukaram he was cured. Rameshwar then became Tukaram's admirer.

A farmer asked Tukaram to guard his farm for a few days because he was going out of Dehu. Tukaram agreed. He went to the farm and devoted his time in singing abhangs and he had no idea what was happening in the farm. The birds came and ate away the crop. When the farmer saw the condition of his farm on his return, he was stunned. He became angry on Tukaram and complained to the elders. The elders went to the farm and saw the farm in much better condition than the surrounding ones. They ordered that the extra yield over the average yield should be given to Tukaram. Tukaram admitted his fault and refused to take what he was offered. He said: it was the God's grace and the extra yield should be given to the Vithal Temple of Dehu.

A Brahmin came to Tukaram and asked him to collect money for him because he had no money to get his daughter married. Tukaram sent the Brahmin to Shiva Kansara, who hated him, much. Shiva grudgingly gave a small coin to the Brahmin and he disappointedly returned to Tukaram. Tukaram converted the coin into gold and returned to the Brahmin.

Mambaji did not like Tukaram. Tukaram's cattle entered into Mambaji's compound and did something. Mambaji became angry and severely beat up Tukaram. Mambaji stopped joining Tukaram's kirtan. Tukaram personally went to Mambaji's house and invited him to join in the kirtan. Now Mambaji became an ardent devotee of the God. Accidently, due to some circumstance Mambaji's son died. His wife with the dead body of her son went to the kirtan assembly of Tukaram and complained to him that he was responsible for the death of her son because Mambaji neglected the duties of a father and wasted his time in singing kirtans. Tukaram began singing his abhang, addressing the God to help him. God came down and revived the child.

As usual, we haven't narrated all such legends because these do not add anything to Tukaram's greatness. We now see the influence of Namdev, Jnandev and Aknath on Tukaram.

## **JNANDEV AND TUKARAM**

A Brahmin went to Tukaram, perhaps, to become his disciple. Tukaram told him: "I am talking to you as a friend and not as a Guru. Yours, mine and of all Marathi, Jnandev is the Guru. He is worthy to become our chief Guru. I do not have that worthiness. I am a shoe of a foot and foot's shoe is good in its foot." This was Tukaram's feeling for Jnaneswar. Tukaram read Jnaneshwari and admired it very much but it was a difficult book for him.

## **AKNATH AND TUKARAM**

In Vinoba's words, Aknath's literature had deep effect on Tukaram. He should be said to be his spiritual heir (manasputra). Both were from the same sampradaya. Everyone accept Jnaneshwar's influence on Tukaram but Aknath's influence on Tukaram is seen to be much stronger. Namdev gave him the first inspiration but the thought-inspiration came from Aknath. Bhagvat of Aknath is simpler than Jnaneshwari, hence, it was easy for Tukaram to read, and it is well known that he spent more time in reading it. Tukaram says, he is much afraid of learning because he fears that it will come in the way of finding God. The same thinking is found in Aknath. In this respect, both agreed. There are so many verses of both, which seem very similar. In Tukaram's abhangs one finds deep introspection, this is rarely found elsewhere. This is his unique specialty.

## **SHIVAJI AND TUKARAM**

There are several versions of Shivaji's contact with Tukaram. In one version, Shivaji sent many things, which included ornaments and nice clothes. Jijabai was very happy. She put on the nice clothes and the ornaments, which she had to return to the couriers when Tukaram arrived at home. Now we follow Vinoba Bhave's version because it is likely to be more probable. It runs as follows: Shivaji was a great man. He was fighting for India's independence (swarajya). He had already established his kingdom in Maharashtra. He was a great admirer of Tukaram. He took all the trouble to go all the way to Dehu to hear Tukaram's kirtans. When he saw the utter penury of Tukaram—not even having ordinary utensils in his house except the earthen ones—he felt that some help should be given to him. For this reason, he sent some brass utensils to Tukaram's house when he was not at home. When he returned home he was surprised to see the change in the house. His wife told him: "Shivaji Maharaj has sent these utensils." On hearing her words Tukaram said: "He sent them not to keep these in our house but to give away as gifts." Saying this, he gave away the utensils to the people. The moment the brass utensils had arrived in the house, his wife had given away the earthenwares to the needy. Now Tukaram had to buy earthen utensils to prepare meals for the day. Tukaram was much disturbed by this windfall and he registered his protest to God.

Shivaji also wanted to honor Tukaram. He sent a palanquin to fetch him. However, Tukaram did not agree to go with Maharaja's men. He was much pained and once again registered his protest to God and asked: "Why do you tempt me with such munificence?" Tukaram chose to remain poor.

## **BAHINABAI AND TUKARAM**

Bahinabai (1628-1700) was not a direct disciple of Tukaram. She was born in Devgaon. She was married at the age of three to a 30-year-old priest Ratnakar Pathak. At the age of seven, she traveled with her parents and her husband to Kolhapur. On the way, they stopped at Pandharpur. Here, she heard Tukaram abhangs. She liked to sing these abhangs. At ten, the family received a cow and a calf in alms. The calf loved Bahina. At the age of eleven, Bahina's calf died. "She fell unconscious for three days ... In her unconscious state, she had a vision of Vithoba and of Tukaram who consoled her and gave her a mantra." Since then, Bahinabai accepted Tukaram as her Guru. Her husband did not like his wife's mode of bhakti. Many times, he was beating her mercilessly. Once her husband fell ill, she nursed him well. When he recovered, Bahinabai went to Dehu along with her parents and her husband. She attended Tukaram's kirtans but could not go to him and express her respect for the fear of her husband's rath.

"Bahinabai has composed a total of about 728 verses, including some in Hindi ... In one of her most popular songs, she describes the Varkari tradition as temple built over the years by the sants: 'Dnyandeva laid the foundation and created the temple. His servant, Namdev, built the wall surrounding it. Eknath, the disciple of Janardan, erected its pillar in the form of his (commentary on the) Bhagwata Purana. Tukaram became its pinnacle.'" (From Ruth Vanita's article in Manushi)

## VINOBA'S COMMENTS ON TUKARAM

Tukaram was not a learned man. Through Jnaneswari and Aknath's Bhagvat he became familiar with the Gita and the Bhagwat. He said: "I am illiterate in the language of learned people." Leaving aside Jnandev, Tukaram's writings are unique in the Marathi language in touching the heart of the people and piercing it. If Jnandev is the peak of the Himalayas, Tukaram's writing is the Ganges of the Marathi language. It enlightens everyone; it is very simple. To teach a child, mother does not have to learn a language. That is the position of Tukaram. He was a straightforward person, who went on progressing day by day. He was diligent hard working person who was ceaselessly after his goal. Such an example is rare among saints. He reached his acme in his last six months. This becomes clear from his abhangs. Tukaram was not popular in his times as he is popular today. In the early years, he was bitter but gradually he became quiet and his language became sweeter. He became so sweet that he was himself amazed by the change taken in him. Tukaram considered him to be a resident of 'Tribhuvan'—three worlds, heaven, earth and the under world. Yet, he said: "Glory to Dehu", his village because he loved his birthplace dearly. Tukaram also was a great devotee of Vithoba. He used to go to Pandharpur every year. No one knows how Tukaram's end came but in his almost last abhang he says: "I could not see the pain of the people, therefore, I took to God's feet for surrender and God took my hand in His hand and led me to such a place where suffering of people was absent."

## RAMDAS (1608-1681)

Ramdas was a saint of Maharashtra, who was the Guru of the renowned ruler, Shivaji Maharaj. He is also remembered as Samarth Ramdas Swami. He was not only a saint but also a sanyasi. He was a devotee of Ram, Hanuman, and Bhavani of Tuljapur. He wanted Ram Raj in India. Moreover, he wanted the people of India to be the devotee of the motherland as Hanuman was the devotee of Ram. He built many Hanuman temples in the country to remind the people of Hanuman's physical strength and his singular devotion to Ram. In his teachings, he gave importance to Vairagya (detachment from householder's life) and Samudayic Sadhna (collective meditation). In his lifetime, he trained some 800 brahmacharis (celibate monks) and established many monasteries. The inmates of these monasteries helped Shivaji considerably. He was the founder of the Ramdasi Sampradaya, which is also known as the Samarth tradition. In this tradition, women too were initiated, which was rare in India. For instance, spiritual successor of Ramdas was a woman named Akkabai. Among his prominent disciples, Venabai (1624-1678) was a poet. Venabai herself was a Guru of poet Balyabai, who was one of her many other disciples. This way, Samarth tradition in treating women as equal and honoring them is remarkable indeed. In short, Ramdas was a saint sanyasi, who was not only a devotee of God but also was not averse to politics.

## BIODATA

Name: Narayan  
Birth Place: Jamba, on the bank of the river Godavari  
Birth date: sometime in 1608  
Mother's name: Ranubai  
Father's name: Suryajipanta Thosar  
School: nothing is known: ran away from home at the age of 12  
Works: Das Bodh and Manache Bodh  
Death Place: Sajjangadh  
Death date: sometime in 1681

## LIFE

We know very little about Ramdas' life. As a boy of twelve, he ran away from home to avoid his marriage. It is said that he went to Panchvati near Nasik. In Nasik, perhaps, he studied Sanskrit. He made a copy of Valmiki Ramayan. The hand written manuscript of it was in the collection of Mr. S. S. Dev of Dhubliah and it might be still there. In addition, on the bank of river Godavari, he was doing 'tapsiya' (austere meditation), which lasted for the next twelve years. At the age of 24, he reached his goal of self-realization. Now for another twelve years, he traveled all over India and visited many centres of pilgrimage. At his age of 36, he settled down in a village, called Masoor, on the bank of the river Krishna, in

Maharashtra. Here, perhaps, he wrote his books and carried out many other activities. During his travels, Ramdas arrived in Singanwadi. Shivaji met him there. Shivaji was fully impressed by his benign personality and accepted him as his Guru. In Vinoba's words, Shivaji placed a note in Ramdas' bag. In it, it was written: "I hand over my kingdom to you." Ramdas said: "You govern the kingdom. You take care of it thinking that it belongs to God Ram or Hari." Their relationship was beneficial to both. Ramdas built his monasteries at Jamba, Chafal, Sajjangadh, Domgaon, Shirgaon, Kanheri and Dadegaon, perhaps, with the help of Shivaji. These seven monasteries became very famous and its inmates were very helpful to Shivaji. Ramdas did not confine his travels only in Maharashtra but he traveled all over India, as was his wont. According to Vinoba Bhave, Ramdas had gone to Thanjavur twice. Once he stayed there for one and a half month. There, he made the local artisans, who were masters in making idols, to make good idols for him. Perhaps these idols were of Hanuman. These idols were of two kinds: In one Hanuman was shown as a devotee of Ram and in the other Hanuman was shown as a valiant warrior. Later, he got these idols installed in many villages of Maharashtra.

Vinoba too had gone to Thanjavur during his tour of South India. He said: There, in Sarasvati Vachnalaya (library), 300-year-old copy of Das Bodh, we came to see. There, it was kept for the Puja (worship) purpose. Along with it, they had a bag. This indicated that the followers of Ramdas were given a bag to carry food for the stomach and a copy of Das Bodh for knowledge. Seeing this, we get an idea of Ramdas' organizational ability.

In this manner, Ramdas carried out his religious and political programs. Jai, jai Raghuvir Samarth was his mantra. He spent his last days in Sajjangadh. When people came to know of his life's end, they began to worry. He said: "When my body and speech will become one with self, even then I will be with people. Consider this Das Bodh as a self-made-image of mine. Therefore, there is no reason for sorrow." He died at the age of 72 and left behind a big Ramdasi Sampradaya.

## WORKS

**Das Bodh:** It consists of 20 chapters. Each chapter is further divided into 20 sub-chapters or sections. There are in all about 7000 verses or Ovis. It mainly deals with asceticism, collective meditation and instructions for the monks. A verse reads: He is a great fool on earth who thinks happiness is found in householder's life.

**Manache Bodh:** It is a smaller work and consists of about 205 shlokas. These are sung in every home in Maharashtra for about 200 years. A shloka reads: All the time you behave very politely. Artificial politeness won't work—it has to be natural. Another shloka reads: With respect worship God. Always go on thinking of his virtues. Thereby, slowly, those virtues enter in us.

Vinoba says: Ramdas has written Ramayan also. The style of bhakta, which Jnandev initiated, was followed by Aknath, Ramdas and Tukaram.

## AKNATH AND RAMDAS

Vinoba said: On Ramdas, Aknath's influence is very much. Both agree that unworldly and worldly life can be harmonized. Tukaram, though living a worldly life, sees opposition between worldly and unworldly life. Ramdas, though living an unworldly life, preaches the harmonization between worldly and unworldly life. Aknath lives a worldly life and attempts to nullify opposition between worldly and unworldly life. Thus, we see the agreement between Aknath and Ramdas.

## RAMDAS AND SHIVAJI

Ramdas said: Shivaji increased the glory of the God—not his. For this people of Maharashtra are grateful to him. Being a king, he was an ascetic. His life had become one with the people. We should always remember his personality and his achievements. How was his speech; how was his walk; how was his manner of giving advice.

Ramdas also wrote to Shivaji's son Shambhaji: How are you behaving? How was your father behaving? Think of it a little. This was the reminder Ramdas sent to Shambhaji.

## **VINOBA AND RAMDAS**

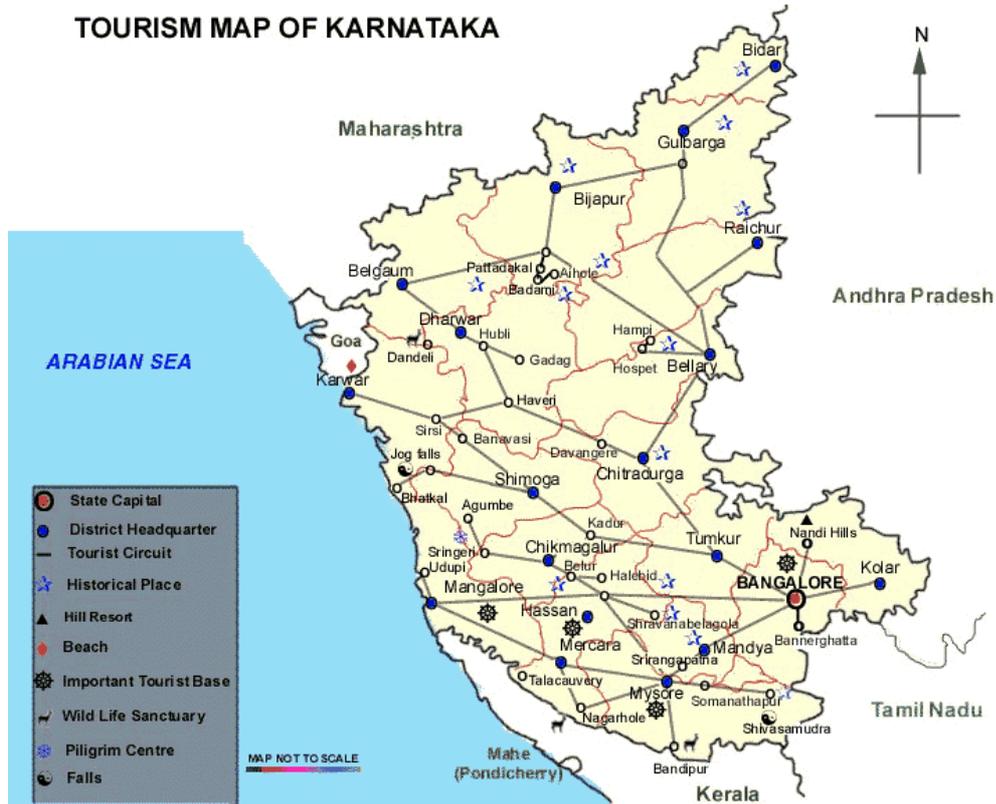
Vinoba wrote: When I was small, my mother used to talk a lot about Ramayan, Mahabharat and Das Bodh. In it, I very much liked the story of Swami and Hanuman. Consequently, from very childhood, I made up my mind for Brahmacharya and become like them. What happened was nice.

The story is:

Ramdas wrote in his Ramayan: "Hanuman went to Asokvan. There he saw white flowers." On hearing this, Hanuman himself came down there and said: "I did not see white flowers at all. They were red. You have made a mistake in your writings. Please correct it. Ramdas said: "What I have written is right. You had seen white flowers." Hanuman said: "I had myself gone there. Am I a liar?" The Matter was taken to God Ram. Ram said: "Flowers were white, but Hanuman's eyes were red due to anger and he saw them red." This is a pleasing story for a child: things appear according to the mental vision of a person.

## CHAPTER 11

### TOURISM MAP OF KARNATAKA



Area: 191791 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 52,850,562 (H: 83.9 % / M: 12.2% / C: 0.78%) / Source: 2001 Census.

### BASAVA (1134-1196)

Basava was a rare human being. He was a founder of a religious order called Veerashaiva Sampradaya. Even then, we do not know his name, his mother's name or his father's name. He was born in a small town called Basavana Bagewadi. It is situated in the present day Bijapur District of Karnataka. From Basavana Bagewadi, he derived his name Basava or Basavanna or Basaveshwara. Whatever might be his name, he was a versatile genius, whose name is known in every home in Karnataka even after almost a millennium. He was a mystic, a Yogi, an idealist, a man of letters, a humanist, an outstanding reformer, a statesman, a wise administrator and above all a courageous man who as the Prime Minister of a kingdom had guts to stand for the human rights of the people and differ with the King. He did not hesitate to give up his post of Prime Minister and live a life of a saint.

### BIODATA

Name: Basava

Birth Place: Basavana Bagewadi

Birth date: sometime in 1134

Mother's name: Not known

Father's name: Not known

School: some educational centre in Kudala Sangama; Guru Jatved Muni

Works: collection of his sayings in Vachana along with others

Death Place: Kudala Sangama

Death date: sometime in 1196

### LIFE

We know nothing about Basava's childhood. It seems that a Yogi called Jatved Muni educated and initiated (lingdiksha) him in Kudala Sangama. Thereby he became a highly learned man. He began his career as an accountant in the court of Kalchuri king Bijjal at

Mangalveda. When Bijjal defeated the Chalukyan King of Kalyani, he shifted his court to Kalyan. Basava went to Kalyan along with the other courtiers of Bijjal. In course of time, Bijjal recognized the moral character and vast learning of Basava and made him the Prime Minister of his kingdom. According to one version, he established a University, named, Shiv-Anubhava-Mantapa under the directorship of a very noble and learned man Allamaprabhu. In another version, Anubhav Mantapa, was a spiritual Parliament to discuss the tenets of Veerashaiva Dharma. In any case, Basava attracted many learned men and saints of the surrounding kingdoms and they carried out discussions on many topics of their interest. Basava was at the zenith of his career; however, he came into trouble when a Brahmin woman married an untouchable man. The society disapproved the marriage. The matter came before the court of Bijjal. Basava stood for the human rights of the couple Haralayya and Madhuvaras. The king did not agree with his Prime Minister. Basava gave up his high position and left Kalyan for Kudala Sangama. He stood for his ideals, became a preacher, and preached equality among all human beings, honesty, simplicity and dignity of labor. He died in 1196. Some say he was murdered within a year after his departure from Kalyan. The others claim that 'being a yogi he released the bonds of the body and soul and took nirvana (Lingaikya) in response to the call from Almighty.'

## **WORKS**

Basava's sayings are his works. He wrote under the pen name Kudalasangamadeva in Kannada (the Lord of meeting rivers). We read a few of his sayings (Vachanas): The power of knowledge destroys ignorance. The power of light dissipates darkness. The power of truth is foe of all untruths. The sharana's experience of god is the sole cure of worldliness—Lord Kudala Sangamadeva.

The rich would put up shrines. What could I, a poor man, do? My limbs are pillars, the body the shrine, the head a cupola of gold: Listen, O lord of the confluent streams, material constructs would perish; while the evolving would persist.

## **A TRIBUTE**

"It was the distinctive feature of his mission that while illustrious religious and social reformers in India before him had each laid his emphasis on one or other items of religion and social reform, either subordinating more or less other items to it or ignoring them altogether, Basava sketched and boldly tried to work out a large and comprehensive programme of social reform with the elevation and independence of womanhood as its guiding point. Neither social conferences, which are usually held these days in several parts of India, nor Indian social reformers, can improve upon that programme as to the essentials. The present day social reformer in India is but speaking the language and seeking to enforce the mind of Basava." (*The Times of India*, May 17, 1918)

## **VINOBA'S COMMENTS**

One thousand years ago, a great man named Basaveshwar was in Karnatak. He was a great reformer. He was a great statesman and a philosopher. He was murdered. Whatever reforms we are talking about today are found in his writings. He said: "Constructive or productive labor is Kailash." From this, we come to see what a great man he was. Further, he said that everyman, whether he is small or big, should do physical labor. This shows that he gave equal respect to physical labor as to mental work. To him, God is Kudala Sangama. Kudala means gathering of all bhaktas. Where all bhaktas come together, that place is where God lives. He used to say: Our God and not my God. That is: God belongs to all.

There exists a biography of Basava written by Thipperudraswamy and published by Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. I haven't read it because I could not obtain it.

## **AKKA MAHADEVI (AROUND 1170 – AROUND 1195)**

Akka Mahadevi was a woman saint of Karnatak. She was the forerunner of the Kashmiri saint Lalleshwari (1335-1387). Both saints worshiped Shiva. Both moved about naked. Both suffered harassment from the local people. Akka was married to a Jain King Kausika. There was luxury all round. She did not want this luxurious life. She wanted to

worship Shiva. The king did not want an ascetic wife but a worldly one and her troubles began. She left her husband and led an ascetic life. In the case of Lalleshwari, she suffered from starvation because her mother-in-law was not willing to give her enough food to survive. She left her husband and home to survive. Both worshipped Shiva and scaled spiritual heights, which even male saints would envy. Akka Mahadevi is a household name in Karnatak. So is Lalleshwari's name in Kashmir. Both are worshipped in their respective country. A little is known about Lalleshwari's life but little is known about Mahadevi's life. Lalleshwari lived enough but Mahadevi lived for a short while. When we do not know enough about Mahadevi, how could we write her biography? We would simply string some sentences from the available biographical articles.

## **BIODATA**

Name: Mahadevi  
Birth Place: Udatadi or Udugani near the ancient city of Banavasi  
Birth date: Not known  
Mother's name: Sumati (according to Chamarasa)  
Father's name: Nirmal (according to Chamarasa)  
School: Not known, Guru Allama Prabhu  
Works: 350 to 430 Vachanas  
Death Place: Shreeshaila in Andhra Pradesh  
Death date: Not known

## **LIFE**

Mahadevi was born in Udatadi, which is situated in the present Shimoga District of Karnataka. Vijaya Dabbe and Robert Zydenbos, in an article in Manushi, tell us that the women writers entered the literary history of Kannada only around 1160 AD. It is reasonable then to assume that Mahadevi might have been born around 1170. She lived for 20 to 25 years. Hence, she might have died around 1195. Whatever might be the fact, it is said that the said women writers belonged to the Virashaiva fold. The Virashaiva movement allowed the women to participate in the intellectual and mystical pursuits. "Among the approximately 300 Vachana authors who are known to us, 30 are women. Akka Mahadevi, the greatest mystic of that time, emerged from this group of writers." She "was admired by her contemporaries for the stature of her personality, the excellence of her vachanas and her mystical heights. The vachana author Chennabasavva has said about her that others might be senior to her in years and might have performed a variety of penances and feats of asceticism, but Akka had really communed with god. Other leading personalities of the movement, such as its founder Basavanna, Allamaprabhu, Siddharama and many others have remembered Akka with affection and respect."

As stated earlier, Mahadevi did not like her royal life and royal husband. She gave up her palatial life. After leaving home, she wandered as a mendicant here and there and then settled down for a while in Basavakalyan in the Bidar District. In Kalyana, she participated in the activities of Anubhava Mantapa. She admired Allama Prabhu, the director of Anubhava Mantapa and she became his disciple. She distinguished herself in the gatherings of the learned scholars and the saints. Later, she moved to the pilgrim centre Shreeshaila and took samadhi at a young age. This is all we can say about her life.

## **VACHANA**

Mahadevi's writings reflect her life. Her pen name is 'Chenna Mallikarjuna' (O Lord who is as white as jasmine). We read a few of her Vachanas:

- A husband inside, a husband outside, one cannot have both, sister. One cannot have both a worldly and a supernatural one. This is in connection with her husband.
- When the entire world is the eye of the lord, on looking everywhere, what can you cover and conceal? This is in connection with her nudity.
- For hunger, there is the village rice in the begging bowl. For thirst, there are tanks, streams and wells. For sleep, temple ruins do well. For the company of the soul I have you, Chenna Mallikarjuna. This is in connection with her wandering life.
- The stream behind, the river in front: Tell me which way to go. The pond behind, the net in front: Tell me where safety is. This is in connection with her security.

- Listen, sister, listen, I have seen a dream: I saw rice, betel, earrings and a coconut ... Who came to the house for alms. He was about to move beyond my reach, I followed him and grabbed his hand. I saw the lord, who is as white as jasmine, and opened my eyes. This is in connection with her realization of God.

This is then a brief account of Mahadevi, who lived for a short span of life and left behind an immortal name, which is revered in every home in Karnataka.

### **KANAKADAS (1486-1594/1606)**

Kanakadas was a saint who was born in Kurubu or shepherd community of the Karnataka State. He was not only the contemporary of the great Purandaradas (1484-1564) but they were also the disciples of the same Guru Vyasaraaya. Purandaradas is considered today the founder of the Karnatak Music and Kanakadas is very popular today for his musical songs in Karnataka. Both belonged to Dasakuta fold of the Haridasa community whereas their Guru Vyasaraaya, who was the disciple of Madhvacharya's disciple Shripadaraja, belonged to Vyasakuta fold of the same Haridasa community in Karnataka. The Haridasa community is Vaishnav and its members are the followers of Madhvacharya; the Sharana community is Saiv and its members are the followers of Basava's Virasaivism. Vachana is the literature of Sharanas; Kirtana is the musical literature of Haridasas. The Kannada literature is enriched by both the communities of Karnataka and the contribution of Kanakadas to it is very significant. We give below his bio data.

#### **BIODATA**

Name: Timmappa

Birth Place: Bada, near Bankapura, in the present day Dharwad District of Karnataka

Birth date: sometime in 1486

Mother's name: Bachchamma

Father's name: Biregouda

School: He studied under a scholar, Shrinivasacharya, in Bankapura

Works: Mohana Tarangini, Nala Charitra, Ramadhanya Charitra, Haribhakti Sara, 250 Kirtanas, some folk-riddles (Mundiges)

Death Place: Kaginelli

Death date: sometime in 1594 or 1606

#### **EARLY LIFE**

Biregouda and his wife, the parents of Kanakadas, lived in a village called Bada near Bankapura. Biregouda, the father, was a chief administrator of 78 villages in the Bankapura region of the Vijayanagara Empire. As a man, he was brave and honest. As an administrator, he was efficient and benevolent. His benign administration made people happy and, in turn, they loved their administrator and his family. Bachchamma, the mother, coming from a shepherd community, was a hardworking and a pious woman. Their child, Kanakadas, was named Timmappa. He was a precocious child and he learnt everything very quickly. Once, he went to Bankapura to watch the competition of drum-players, who had arrived from the surrounding region. His Kuruba (shepherd) communities too came to Bankapura to participate in the competition. He was impressed by the artistry of drum playing and dancing so much that he asked his father to give him a drum. His father obtained a drum from his shepherd community and gave it to his son. Timmappa mastered the drum playing in no time and began dancing with it. Everyone was astonished to see his skill in the regional folk-art. A great Brahmin scholar, Shrinivasacharya, of Bankapura noticed the virtuosity of this small boy. He went straight to his father's house and told him that he would like to educate his son. The father was surprised. He could not believe that a Brahmin would teach a non-Brahmin boy. He felt grateful and allowed his son to study under the great Brahmin scholar.

The Acharya taught the small boy for a few years. Timmappa, by the age of ten, learnt prosody, grammar, rhetoric, drama and many other subjects. By the age of twelve, he had learnt Kannada and Sanskrit so well that he began to compose his own poetry. The Acharya was extremely pleased with his ward's progress and he visualized his great future. At home, his father taught him horse riding, swimming, wrestling, archery and marital arts, which were necessary for the son of an administrator. The parents were happy to see their child healthy

and making rapid progress in learning the scholarly subjects. The family was doing very well in every respect and hoping for the great future for their son.

These good days did not last long. At the age of 13, Timmappa lost his father. Moreover, his father's archenemy, Mallanayaka, occupied the same post, which his father had held for the past so many years. The man was vindictive. He began to harass Timmappa and his mother who were reduced to penury because their bread earner had died. Timmappa's mother decided to leave Bada and went to Kaginelli where some of their relatives were living. Now Timmappa began to help the relatives in their work. He also undertook the routine duty of tending the goats and sheep. This way he made many friends in Kaginelli. To educate his friends he started a night school at the age of sixteen. He taught boys how to sing devotional songs and how to perform folk-plays known as Yakshaganas. He, himself, was a good actor. These activities made him famous in the surrounding region.

One day, he was working in the village farmland. While digging the soil, he found a few pots full of gold coins, which were hidden by someone in the past. In spite of his poverty, he gave away all the pots and gold coins for the welfare of the village community and for the renovation of the dilapidated temple of Kaginelli. The people of Kaginelli admired his devotion to God and for his generosity, they began to call him Kanakappa—Kanak means gold. This way the name Timmappa changed into Kanakappa.

When Mallanayaka heard of Kanakappa's good fortune, he could bear it no longer. He came to Kaginelli and attacked his house. In the scuffle, Kanakappa was badly wounded. It took several months for him to recover. During the recovery period, he composed his famous poem "Hari Bhakti Sara" (Essence of Devotion to Hari). The fame of this work reached Hampi, the Capital of the Vijayanagara Empire. The Emperor invited Kanakappa to participate in the Vijayadashami Festival. He stayed in Hampi for ten days and participated in all the festivities. When he left Hampi, in the words of his biographer Naikar: 'he received the formal order of appointment as the Administrator of Bada and Bankapura, royal vests and a gem-studded sword and the title of "Nayaka".' When he reached home, his mother received him warmly. She was pleased to learn that her son has recovered his father's position and the title. They returned to Bada with deep satisfaction.

### **KANAKANAYAKA AS AN ADMINISTRATOR**

Kanakanayaka took up his new job with real earnestness. He built roads, constructed reservoirs and repaired temples wherever these were needed. He enforced night patrol in all the villages under his jurisdiction and thereby completely removed thievery from his territory. The villagers, once again, became prosperous and happy as they were under his father's jurisdiction.

Now Kanakanayaka's mother asked him to marry and he was married to a girl from a reputed family of Bankapura. His mother named her daughter-in-law Laxmidevi. They had a son whom they named Biranayaka. The family was once again passing through happy times. In the words of his biographer, Kanakanayaka 'arranged for the regular car-festival of Lord Sangameshawara at the confluence of Dharma and Varada rivers; and of Lord Narasimha at Kaginelli. Similarly he got a Rest House (Vihara Griha) built at Kaginelli, named the newly formed village around the Rest House as "Dasanakoppa" and made all arrangements for the livelihood of the farmers there as also in the neighboring villages ... He got the temple of Goddess Shakti built at Kunduru.' Once, he camped for a few days in Kaginelli and wrote his famous poem Mohana Tarangini (Ocean of Beauty).

Unfortunately, these good days of Kanakanayaka passed away. All of a sudden, his wife and his son died one after the other. He was shocked and tried to regain his equanimity. However, the death of her daughter-in-law and her grandson affected his mother very badly. He tried to console her as much as he could do but bad days had set in and he had to face the new situation bravely. The regime in the Capital of the Vijayanagara Empire too had changed because of the death of the benevolent Emperor. Kanakanayaka lost favor with the new regime and was waiting for his removal. During this sad period, one night God appeared in his dream and told him to give up his worldly life. The next morning, when he woke up, he decided to become a sanyasi. Perhaps, his mother too might not have raised objection because they both had lost any interest in the worldly life. At this moment, he received a letter from the new Emperor informing him of his removal from the State service. This news

made him happy because he was now a free man. He wrote his feelings in the following kirtana: Enough of the worldly service, O Rangaraya: Enough of the service of the human beings. I am indeed tired of this service, Rangaraya; let me now meditate upon Thy feet, O Master of the World.

The sad circumstances made Kanakanayaka to give up his worldly life and changed over to saintly life. First, he discarded his royal garments and put on the garments of a mendicant. From Kanakanayaka, he became now Kanakadas.

### **KANAKADAS AS A SAINT**

Now with his mother's permission, he set out of Bada and went to his favorite place Kaginelli where he had spent his boyhood. There, he stayed for a while but then he continued his journey right up to Tirupati. In Tirupati, he met Rangadasa, a saint from the untouchable community. He sought his advice. He asked him how he could become a dasa of God. Rangadasa enlightened him and guided him for a while. He showed him the Bhakti Marg to worship God. Kanakadas took leave of his first Guru and then went to the Tirupati temple. He bowed before the idol and sat there in meditation. After a while, he came out of the temple and began his journey back to home. On reaching Bada, he came to know that his mother had died during his absence. This made him sad. He went to the cremation ground where his mother was cremated. He performed some rites. He lost now his interest in Bada. Only link that remained in Bada was with the temple of Lord Adikeshava. He took out the idol of the Lord from the temple and went to Kaginelli. There, he installed the idol and built a temple. This place was named as the Adikeshava temple of Kaginelli. From now on Kaginelli became the permanent residence of Kanakadas. From here, he went out on pilgrimages very often but he always returned to Kaginelli until he died. Whenever he was in Kaginelli, he gave discourses on Bhakti Marg in the Adikeshava temple. The platform from where he gave discourses came to be known as Platform of Kanakadas.

The first pilgrimage of Kanakadas from Kaginelli was to Sosale Monastery at Tirumakudalu. During his tenure as the administrator of Bada and Bankapura, he had met Tatacharya of the Tirupati and Vyasraya (Vyasartha Swami) of the Sosale Monastery. Now he wanted to renew his contact with Vyasraya because he wanted to learn from him whatever he would teach. Therefore, he went to his Monastery. Vyasraya and Purandaradas received him warmly but the authorities of the Monastery did not want him. Purandaradas, in one of his kirtanas, wrote: When Vyasamuni showed his grace: To Kanakadasa, the authorities of the monastery complained against their own Guru. In spite of this bickering, Vyasraya kept Kanakadas in his monastery and taught him whatever he wanted to learn. In the biographer Naikar's words: "Thus extremely pleased with Kanakadasa's spiritual and mystic achievements, Shri Vyasraya Swami guided him to go to the Narasimha Monastery ... and achieve spiritual fulfillment through service to Lord Hari. He blessed Kanakadasa whole-heartedly."

Kanakadas stayed in the Narasimha Monastery for sometime and then went to Tirupati to attend the Kalayana Mahotsava Festival of the Tirupati temple. He stayed there for a long time but then remembered his home and returned to Kaginelli. On his return, he did not rest in one place, went on visiting nearby shrines, and contacted some illness. He had to rest in Kadaramandalgi for three months to recover from his illness. After his recovery, he went to Bada, Bankapura and many other places. At Chandragutti, he took up a drum and played upon it along with other drummers and sang the famous song, "Come on and see our gods have come..." From here, he went through many other places and reached Hampi where he visited the Porch of Purandaradas along with many other places. From Hampi, he went to Kanakagiri and stayed there for a long time. Here, he composed a hymn of ninety-seven stanzas in sangatya meter.

On his way home, he learnt the demise of his Guru Vyasraya and of his friend and well-wisher, Purandaradas. In Kaginelli, he arranged for the regular service at the temple of Adikeshava. Once again, Kanakadas set out for some other pilgrimage and he visited many shrines. We would not like to continue with him because we do not know all the places he visited in Karnataka. Moreover, he rarely went out of Karnataka except when he went to Tirupati. His usual program was to go to a shrine and sing new kirtans in each place; hence, there is nothing much to report except the various miracles he performed.

Kanakadas had worn him out doing many pilgrimages. In his old age, he became ill often. When he passed away, his biographer Naikar does not mention it clearly. In one place, he says he passed away in Kaginelli in 1606. In another place, he says he passed away in 1593-94. In any case, fortunately, he lived a long life and it was fruitful.

## LEGENDS

There are many legends associated with Kanakadas. We would narrate only two, which are associated with Udupi, the most famous pilgrim centre of Karnataka.

- Once, Kanakadas visited Udupi. No one gave him alms. He had to sleep hungry. Then God himself came and gave him his gold ornaments. Kanakadas sold these ornaments and bought his food. The next day, the idol of God was without ornament. Kanakadas told the main priest that God had given him some ornaments, which he sold to such and such person. The priest called the concerned person and found the ornaments from him. The person handed over the ornaments when he came to know that these were of the temple.
- In Udupi, the local persons built a Kanaka Mantapa for Kanakadas because they did not want him to stay with them. The next time, he went to Udupi, he went to Kanaka Mantapa to stay but people drove him out. They did not allow him to enter in the temple to see the idol of the God. Kanakdas had no alternative but to go and sit behind the temple and sing his kirtanas. God made the hole in the wall of the temple and faced Kanakadas to hear his kirtanas. The priest was stunned. "Since then the hole in the back wall of the temple came to be known as 'Kanaka's peep hole' (Kanakana Kindi)."

## KIRTAN

We haven't said about the various works of Kanakadas because I do not know Kannada and could not decide which work is purely devotional. His works seemed to be mythological stories to me. Hence, it is proper we restrict ourselves to kirtanas, which are devotional in nature. The selection of Kirtanas is of Naikar.

- Toredu Jivisabahude? Raga: Murari; Tala: Ekatala (Can we live happily without your feet, Lord?)
- Narayana emba namada Raga: Kambodhi; Tala: Zampe (Name of Narayana)
- Satyavantara Sangaviralu Raga: Purvi; Tala: Rupaka (When you enjoy the company of the truthful)
- Tallanisadiru kandya, talu manave Raga:Kedara; Tala: Zampe (Be not anxious, O Mind)

In writing the above biography, I have relied on Basavaraj Naikar's book Kanakadasa, published by National Book Trust, India

## CHAPTER 12



Area: 275068 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 76,210,007 (H: 89 % / M: 9% / C: 1%) / Source: 2001 Census.

### POTHANA (AROUND 1430-AROUND1500)

Pothana was a great saint of Andhra Pradesh. His name is a household word among the Telugu-speaking people. His 'Andhra Maha Bhagavatha' is found in every home of a literate person in Andhra. His biographer, D. Venkatavadhani, tells us: "Its style is extraordinarily mellifluous though full of Sanskrit words and compounds. Like light and air it has spread even to the remotest corners of the Telugu country and even today it is no exaggeration to say that every educated Andhra knows at least four or five of its verses by heart. It is a repository of the natural sweetness of the Telugu language and a rare and everlasting ornament to Telugu Muse." Of such a great man, we know only a bare outline of his life.

#### BIODATA

Name: Pothana  
 Birth Place: Bammara, a village in the present day Warangal District of Andhra Pradesh, 50 km from Warangal (Orugallu)  
 Birth date: 1430 (tentative)  
 Mother's name: Lakkama  
 Father's name: Kesana  
 School: He learnt Telugu and Sanskrit from his father at home.  
 Works: Veerabhadravijayamu, Bhogini Dandaka and Andhra Maha Bhagavatha (magnum opus)  
 Death Place: Bammara  
 Death date: 1500 (tentative)

## LINEAGE

Pothana was proud of his lineage. He wrote about it in his first and last books. Here, we will follow his above said biographer, who wrote: "The genealogy given in Bhagavatha is briefer, but it does not differ from that found in Veerabhadravijayamu. From those we can know that the family of Pothana belongs to Koundinya gotra and Apastamba sutra. The word Amatya suffixed to the name of Pothana in the colophons of the Bhagavatha indicates that he belongs to the Niyogi sect of Brahmins. Lakkama and Kesana are the parents of Pothana, Thippana his elder brother, Ellana his grandfather and Somana his great grandfather. Gourama and Annaya are the parents of Somana, and Bhimana and Malaya are his grandfather and great grandfather respectively." Pothana has described his father as well versed in Saiva scriptures and philosophy. In describing his mother, he has compared her with all the Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. She was 'a repository of charity, virtue, intelligence, honor, delicacy and magnanimity and who was comparable to Bhavani in worshipping at the feet of Lord Shiva.' He did not fail to describe his elder brother. He said he was having good looks and had all the qualities of head and heart. From this lineage, we find that Pothana came from a good family and the members of his family were well educated and devout. He inherited these qualities and furthered it remarkably to become a household name in Andhra.

## LIFE

Pothana was born in a family who belonged to Virasaiva fold. We do not know in which year he was born but his biographer arrives at the year 1430 after very long discourse and arguments. We have accepted this tentative year as Pothana's birth date. Hence, we do not know anything about his childhood or boyhood except that he was educated by his father. This fact is attested by Pothana himself in his works. Later, his preceptor, Ivaturi Somasekhara encouraged him to write his first poetic work Veerabhadravijayamu. At that date, he was still in his Virasaiva fold and his work is Saivite. The work is his first attempt and it is immature to say the least. This shows, as his biographer has noted, that 'in spite of his strong leaning towards Vaishnavism, he never showed any disregard for Saivism.' This is also clear from his oft-quoted verse: "the person who does not worship Shiva and who does not sing the praise of Lord Vishnu whole-heartedly is merely a burden to his mother."

After the completion of his education, for his advanced studies, 'he had probably gone to the neighboring cities like Orugallu and Rachakonda,' and 'to eke out his livelihood as an accountant.' In his early immature life, he might have passed through some nasty experiences, which might have left its sad impressions. His biographer wrote: "He might have sought the favor of some wealthy persons of Orugallu or Sarvagna Singabhupalu of Rachkonda. During this period, he must have written the Bhogini Dandaka at the request of Singabhupala." *Bhogini Dandaka* is a book, in which Singabhupala is a hero. This book is of no interest to us and we would like to skip it.

Pothana's city life had an abrupt end. Being a very self-respecting person, he could not adjust to the sophistry and the hypocrisy of the city life. He returned home soon, never to leave it again. Now he led a peasant's life. He went to the fields, tilled the soil, sowed the seeds, raised the crops and brought back home the grains. This was his routine. In this manner, he spent rest of his life. In his spare time, he wrote his immortal work, the *Bhagavatha*.

The question remains is how Pothana came to be a Vaishnav when he and his family worshipped Shiva. We seek answer to this question from his biographer in his own words. He wrote: "After the fall of the Kakatiya Empire, the Telugu country came to be divided among the kings of Vijayanagara, Reddis of Kondavidu, Velama Kings of Rachakonda and the Gajapatis of Cuttack. As they were fighting with each other, the Bahmini Sultans took advantage of the situation and occupied large portions of their country without much difficulty. The whole of Telangana was then in a state of chaos [because] of the constant battles between the kings of Rachakonda and the Bahmini Sultans. Though the kings of Rachakonda re-occupied the fortresses like Orugallu and Bhuvanagiri with the help of Gajapatis, they could not keep them under their possession for long. By 1475, the kingdoms

of Rachakonda and Devarakonda passed into the hands of Mohammadshah II. The result was that there was neither peace nor safety in Telangana [because] of these battles.”

“The Vijayanagara emperors tried their best to uphold the Vedic Dharma. Sayana wrote an authoritative commentary on the Vedas and helped the propagation of the Vedic religion. [However] ... some ... disliked the Vedic religion and traditions. The Vaishnavites belonging to the Mahanubhava School, the Virasaivas, the Buddhists and the Jains were the most important of them. Pothana might have, after seeing their emotional outbursts and hearing their incoherent prattling become distressed and [concluded] that the Hariharadvaita propounded by Thikkana was the best. It is evident from the Vaishnavite work that Naynacharya, the son of Vedanta Desika, came to Rachakonda, defeated the scholars following other religions and converted Singaya Madhavendra to Vaishnavism. This campaign for Vaishnavism might have been to some extent the cause for Pothana becoming devoted to Lord Vishnu.”

The above long narration might be right but we have no means to know what was in Pothana’s mind. The fact is that he wrote his Bhagavatha and captured the heart of his people. He dedicated his work to God and not to any mortal being. He had learnt the lessons from his past experiences of life. Being a peasant, he might have died in Bammera because a farmer cannot afford to leave his home for long. When he died, we do not know but we accept the conjecture of his biographer and accept his death date tentatively as 1500.

### **POTHANA’S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE**

Pothana’s derived his philosophy from the Bhagavatha he wrote. We quote a few passages of his.

“When there are beautiful plots of ground, why these cotton beds for lying down? When there are the natural palms, why this collection of eating plates? When there are barks, hides and grass mats, why these bales of clothes for wearing? When there are caves to live in, what for are these lots of mansions and places? Don’t the trees shower fruit juice? Don’t the rivers have sweet waters? Don’t the virtuous ladies offer enough food? What for, then, should the ascetics serve those blind with the intoxication of wealth?”

“O Lord, the giver of boons to the ascetics, kindly grant me service of thy lotus-feet, friendship with thy devotees and everlasting kindness to all creatures.”

“If one does not worship Shiva with outstretched hands, if he does not praise the glory of Hari till his mouth aches, and if he does not think of virtues like kindness and truthfulness, then what is the use of his birth except defiling the mother’s womb?”

### **VINOBA’S VISIT TO POTHANA’S VILLAGE**

Vinoba said: We went to Pothana’s village. There, celebration was going on in his memory. People did not forget him because he did selfless service. He wrote Bhagavatha for the purification of the people. From his writings, he did not take anything for himself. Only he dedicated his book to God. In return, God gave him poverty, love and work for doing agriculture. We see that in the Telugu region, in every home, whether of rich or poor, Pothana’s Bhagavatha is read. In addition, there is one story of the Telugu poet Pothana. Perhaps, Pothana’s Bhagavatha might be the most famous work in the Telugu language. He was a farmer and until the end of his life, he remained a farmer. When the book was completed, then someone said, it should be dedicated to the king. Pothana said: “No, I am singing the glory of God Krishna, why should I dedicate it to the King?” He flatly refused to dedicate his book to the king.

In writing the above biography, I have relied on D. Venkatavadhani’s book ‘Pothana’ published by Sahitya Academy, New Delhi.

## CHAPTER 13



**Area: 38863 Km<sup>2</sup> / Population: 31,841,374 (H: 56.2 % / M: 24.7% / C: 19%) / Source: 2001 Census.**

### **EZHUTTACCHAN (LIVED SOMETIME BETWEEN 1425-1525)**

Tunchattu Ramanujan Ezhuttacchan was a renowned saint of Kerala, who is 'generally considered the Father of Malayalam Poetry and indeed the Father of Modern Malayalam.' The name we read above needs explanation because we are not familiar with the naming custom of Kerala. Tunchattu is the birthplace of the saint. Ramanujan is his name. Ezhuttacchan means a schoolteacher. The saint's profession became his surname. We will use his first name Ramanujan, whenever we want to refer to the saint here.

Ramanujan is considered as Valmiki and Vyas of the Malayalam language and he is compared with Tulsidas of the Hindi language. This is not surprising because he wrote Ramayana, Mahabharat and Bhagvat in the Malayalam language. He is indeed a great man of Kerala but we know very little about his life. The following bio data testify to it.

#### **BIODATA**

Name: Ramanujan  
Birth Place: Trikandiyur in Tirur  
Birth date: Not known  
Mother's name: Not known  
Father's name: Not known  
School: He was educated in his brother or cousin's school

Works: Adhyatma Ramayana (magnum opus), Uttara Ramayana, Sri Mahabharata, Bhagavata, Hari Nama Kirtana, IrupattinaluVrittam, Brahmanda Puranam, Devi Mahatmayam, Satamukha Ramayanam, Chintaratnam, Kaivalya Navanitam and Kerala Natakam

Death Place: Not known

Death date: Not known

## LIFE

Ramanujan was born in a Nayar/Nair (an upper class non-Brahmin community) family. His birthplace, Trikandiyur in Tirur, is in the present day Malappuram District of Kerala. We have stated earlier that Tunchattu is his birthplace but that might be the short name of his birthplace. We know nothing about his early childhood. He had an elder brother (some say a cousin brother), who educated him in his Gurukul. His brother was a learned man and he gave him a thorough education and training. Ramanujan then traveled in South India and went to Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. There, perhaps, he came into contact with some outstanding scholars and learnt from them what he wanted to learn. For instance, he learnt a poetic technique called kilippattu (Song of the Bird) from Tamil Nadu. Later, he used it in a very original way in his own works. This shows his creative genius. The use of this technique is considered the original contribution of Ramanujan to the Malayalam language. From his works, we see that he was a very learned man and a philosopher. From his life as a schoolteacher, we find him as a kind man, who was really a saintly person.

On his return from Tamil Nadu, he began his career as a schoolteacher in Kerala. He selected a farm by the name Tunchan Parampu; which is near the present day Tirur Railway Station. "Ezhuttacchan is believed to have run his school there and initiated the education of generations. Even now children are ritually initiated into reading and writing on that spot; sometimes a handful of soil is taken away from there for initiating children elsewhere. Tunchan Parampu is now maintained as a memorial to the poet by the State and its people."

Ramanujan remained for most of his life a schoolteacher and wrote most of his great works during this period. In the later life, he became a sanyasi (mendicant). Some say he was married and had a daughter. The others say he was unmarried and had a niece. Whatever might be the fact; his daughter or niece took care of him and ran the house for him. In his old age, he built 13 houses on the bank of a river near Chittur. He gifted away 12 houses to Tamil Brahmins and he occupied the remaining one for his own use. Here, he taught his disciples and wrote his last works. The colony of 12 Tamil houses he named Ramanand Agraharam, which is sometimes called Ramanand Puram. Later, one of his disciples, Surya Narayana, built two temples in the colony. "The rituals established in the temples at the time they were founded are still observed. More importantly, the anniversary of Ezhuttacchan's samadhi continues to be observed in the colony ever since those days. Some festivals in the Rama temple are also connected with Ezhuttacchan. The festival of lamps in the temple on the first day of Navaratri is known as Ezhuttacchan's illumination (Ezhuttacchan Vilakku)."

It is not clear where Ramanujan took his samadhi. Was it in Tirur or in Chittur? 'There is also a story that Ezhuttacchan died in his home at Tirur and the objects connected with his life since placed in the Chittur home had been brought there after his samadhi.'

## WORKS

We have listed, in the bio data a dozen of works of Ramanujan. The authorship of some of these works is in dispute. We will only consider a few of his works, which are authentically his.

**Adhyatma Ramayana:** This work is not a translation of Valmiki Ramayana but it is more or less a translation of the Sanskrit Adhyatma Ramayana, which is a part of the Brahmanda Purana. It is divided into six sections or Kandas. The translation is by no means word-by-word. Ramanujan had marked originality and he added and dropped some portions as he went along the original text. In the end, he produced a remarkable work in the Malayalam literature.

**Sri Mahabharata:** The original Sanskrit Mahabharata consists of about 2,15,000 lines. Ramanujan had condensed it into a little over 20,000 lines. He increased the number of

eighteen parvas of the original into twenty-one in his work. The poetry in his Mahabharata is better than in his Ramayana. "All scholars agree that this is a work of the poet in his mature years."

**Sri Mahabhagavata:** The original Sanskrit Bhagavata consists of twelve books. In the Malayalam work, Ramanujan wrote only the first nine books. The remaining books are written by others. In this respect, the work is not wholly his. The work consists of about 43,000 lines in the format of the Song of the Bird.

In writing this biography, I have relied on K. Raghavan Pillai's book 'Ezhuttacchan' published by Sahitya Academy, New Delhi.