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Saint *Jnaneshwar*: A Spiritual Leader of *Varkari Sampradaya* (Sect) of Maharashtra; a Retrospection

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Abstract:

Throughout human history, spiritual masters have come to this world to awaken within us the light of divinity with the help of their teaching they taught us that God is present in all creations and guide us to realize this. We too can be the bearers of this spiritual light, which we can share with this world by practicing it. Saint Jnaneshwar being spiritual leader (1275-1296) was the greatest mystic saint poet and philosophers of India (Maharashtra) during medieval era. He was born in Maharashtra in the thirteenth century. During this period in Maharashtra very few people were acquainted with the knowledge of Sanskrit in society. As a result of it the majority of the common masses were denied the wealth of ancient Hindu scriptures and religious knowledge. He rose as a very bright star on the horizon of Maharashtra as the authority of scriptural, spiritual knowledge and he rebelled out against the strict norms set up by the Brahmins by using the local language Marathi as his vehicle for preaching.

The name Jnaneshwar means 'Lord of knowledge' (Jnaniyacha Raja). He is also called as 'Mauli' means 'mother'. Jnaneshwar is said to have laid the foundation of the Bhakti movement 'Varkari Sampradaya' in Maharashtra which was later on taken to its peak by Tukaram and other

saints. This paper tries to explore the intellectual and spiritual legacy and teachings of Saint Jnaneshwar for the establishment of bhakti marga for the wellbeing of common man and path to attain moksha.

Keywords: Saint Jnaneshwara, Varkari Sampradaya, Mauli, Lord Vitthala, Jnaniyacha Raja, Bhakti, Purushartha, Pasayadana, Chidvilas, Pandharpur, Vasudeva kutubakam

Throughout human history, spiritual masters have come to this world to awaken within us the light of divinity with the help of their teaching they taught us that God is present in all creations and guide us to realize this. We too can be the bearers of this spiritual light, which we can share with this world by practicing it. Saint *Jnaneshwar* being spiritual leader (1275-1296) was the greatest mystic saint poet and philosophers of India (Maharashtra) during medieval era. He was born in Maharashtra in the thirteenth century. During this period in Maharashtra very few people were acquainted with the knowledge of *Sanskrit* in society. As a result of it the majority of the common masses were denied the wealth of ancient Hindu scriptures and religious knowledge. He rose as a very bright star on the horizon of Maharashtra as the authority of scriptural, spiritual knowledge and he rebelled out against the strict norms set up by the *Brahmins* by using the local language *Marathi* as his vehicle for preaching.

The name *Jnaneshwar* means 'Lord of knowledge' (*Jnaniyacha Raja*). He is also called as '*Mauli*' means 'mother'. *Jnaneshwar* is said to have laid the foundation of the Bhakti movement '*Varkari Sampradaya*' in Maharashtra which was later on taken to its peak by Tukaram and other saints. '*Jnaneshwar* laid the foundation and initiated the construction of the temple. *Namadeva* as the servant masoner constructed the floors and walls. *Ekanath* alias *Janardana* erected the supporting pillars in the form of preaching from *Shrimad Bhagvad* and *Tukaram* adorned it with the golden *kalash* on the pinnacle of this temple to

teach philosophy of constant God-remembrance i.e. the philosophy of devotion or *bhakti*.¹

Even today *Varkaris* place the *Padukas* (Foot wear) of *Jnaneshwar* in a palanquin (*Palki*) and travel by foot from Alandi to Pandharpur during the holy month of *Ashadh* and *Kartik* of the Hindu calendar i.e. July and November month of English calendar; where people walk long distances from Alandi to Pandharpur with bare feet by continuous chanting the name of Lord *Vitthala* incarnation of Lord Vishnu to the holy place of Pandharpur, to worship Him.

He wrote '*Jnaneshwari*' the significant commentary on '*Srimad Bhagavad Gita*', '*Amrutanubhava*' or '*Anubhavamruta*' (Im mortal Experience, the verses on the divine nectar of spiritual path) and *Chandeva Pashasti* (Sixty-five verses conveyed the essence of Advaita Philosophy) and '*Haripatha*' a song praising or chanting the name of *Lord Vitthala*. Saint *Nivruttinath* his elder brother and Guru who initiated him as his disciple instructed *Jnaneshwar* to write a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* in Marathi. *Jnaneshwar* composed the 18 chapters in a metre called '*Ovi*' and brought the *Bhagavad Gita* to the common man who could not understand Sanskrit. It is said that *Jnaneshwar* was only sixteen years old when he composed it. The language and the poetry used was captivating and is considered the basic text of the *Varkari* sect. The 700 shlokas of the *Gita* were dealt with in 9000 *ovi*'s. The *Pasayadan* or the last nine verses of the *Jnaneshwari* are most popular of them all, he prayed everything for welfare and wellbeing of others and all humanity and nothing for himself. Saint *Jnaneshwar* himself believed that 'The whole world has one soul'.

Jnaneshwari being the magnum opus of *Jnaneshwar*, it is also called as *Jnanadevi* as well as *Bhavartha-Dipika* i.e., a torch enlightening the import of the original text. *Jnaneshwar* himself does not use any title. He describes his work as an ornament to the *Gita*, in the form of the *Marathi* version. The titles *Jnaneshwari* and *Jnana-devi* are used by *Namadeva* while *Janabai* suggests the other title i.e., *Bhavartha-Dipika*.

¹ Rahirkar, G.S., *Sakal Sant Gatha*, p. 542, ab. 3757, 3 rd ed., Prembodha Prakashan, 1887.

There are seven hundred verses of the Gita while the number of the *ovis* in the *Jnaneshwari* is about nine thousand. In these he tries to bring out fully the spirit of loving devotion that pervades the Song of the Lord. This is the message of the Gita and Jnaneshwar proclaims it in words that are so sublime, so lucid and so enchanting. The aim of the *Jnaneshwari* is to spread spiritual bliss, to eliminate the dearth of discrimination and to enable any aspirant to have the glimpse of Divine Knowledge. The *Jnaneshwari* gives a detailed analysis of metaphysics, astrology and yoga. It is widely studied in most households in Maharashtra and has been greatly revered by all other saints of *Varkari Sampradaya* as important text of *varkari's*. Prof. Patwardhan rightly says that "The general drift of the teachings of *Jnanadevi* is to emphasize *Upasana* and *Bhakti*, service and love of God, not the identity of the Bhakta and his Lord, is to be inferred from the fact that Jnanadeva is at his best, his spirit in the full swing of its pinions and his soul in sympathetic raptures in those portions of *Jnanadevi* that deal with the *Bhaktiyoga* system which maintains that salvation is to be attained by means of *Bhakti* or is *Bhakti*."

Prof. W. B. Patwardhan, further writes on *ovi* used by Jnaneshwar in *Jnaneshwari* commentary on *Bhagvad Gita* in Marathi as, "trips, it gallops, it dances, it whirls, it ambles, it trots, it runs, it takes long leaps or short jumps, it halts or sweeps along, it evolves a hundred and one graces at the master's command." The *Shanta Rasa* or the 'peaceful flavour' predominates the whole work of *Jnaneshwari*. In the case of Jnanadeva this *Shanta Rasa* does not mean merely a negative otherworldly sentiment. It is identical with *Bhakti Rasa* which is a positive feeling of deep devotion.

The beauty and wisdom of Jnaneshwara's teachings have served over the centuries to other saints of *Varkari Sampradaya* and common masses. His teachings brought transformation in the society of Maharashtra which was orthodox in nature. His whole life was determined to the upliftment of common masses. He was completely devoted to Lord Vitthala (Ultimate Reality). He re-established the Varkari movement which is a path combining Vedic

doctrines with *jnana* and *bhakti* (*Jnana yukta bhakti*), that is devotion guided by knowledge, and believed that one cannot be liberated unless one attains the true and divine knowledge of Brahman. He regards *Bhakti* as the fifth *Puruṣārtha*² or highest goal of life, higher than *Moksha* (or liberation). *Moksha* means the experience of complete merger of the individual self in the Absolute or God. The experience of *Bhakti* involves psychological union with God while preserving the individuality for tasting the sweetness of Love Divine. Being a great *bhakta*, for *Jnaneshwar*, *bhakti* or loving devotion is the fruit of right knowledge and the spring of right actions. It is the supreme acme of human life. He speaks about *Jnanottar bhakti* which *akrutrim* means natural or spontaneous which is unique in nature.

The *Varkari* Panth (Pilgrim Path) or *Varkari Sampradaya* (Pilgrim Sect) is one of the most important *Vaishnava Sampradaya* in India. The *Varkari* movement owes its widespread popularity in its annual pilgrimage to *Pandharpur* which every year attracts very large crowds of pilgrims and well-wishers. The pilgrims from many countries like Japan, Germany etc. are also seen occasionally. It is not restricted to a particular caste, class or race; rather everyone is welcome in the vast spiritual family, irrespective of man-made distinctions. The history shows that, many of the holy men or saints respected by all hailed from low caste. This is suggestive of spiritual democracy in the *Varkari Sampradaya*, where freedom and equality rests on the principle of the spiritual brotherhood and belongingness to one's God. This movement in *Maharashtra* encompasses the all life in all its aspects. The main practice is remembering and chanting the name of Lord *Vitthala* (Form of Lord *Vishnu*) who is also called as '*Mauli*' means 'mother'. Teachings of saint *Jnaneshwar* have recourse to great devotion among masses and enlightened them on *bhakti* path leading to liberation. He said that when one reaches the state of *kaivalya* or *samadhi* there is experience of oneness, with constant *bhakti*. The

² Dandekar S.V., *Sārtha Jnaneshwari*, 18- 867, 11th edition, 1997, Varkari shikshan Samstha, Alandi (Devachi), Pune.

experience of universal oneness leads to the awareness of *bhakti* (heart), *karma* (action) and *jnana* (knowledge) together. He experiences the stage of *Samatvam Yoga Uchyate* which is a complete state of balance, where there is total and complete absorption with the universe.

He had achieved control of every aspect of life being initiated by his *guru Nivritthinath* in *hatha yoga*. He was true yogi. It is said once he put his hand on the head of a buffalo, connected himself with that buffalo and the buffalo started reciting the *Vedas*. One story narrates *Jnaneshwar* making a concrete wall fly in the sky taking him and his siblings to meet another hatha yogi called *Changdeva*. He spoke on *Kundalini* energy and on awakening the energy through various practices.

He faced many difficulties in his entire life; many learned and so called spiritually elevated people denied the basic human rights to him and his siblings, yet he always remained calm and balanced, giving the best of knowledge and practices throughout his short but meaning life, a true yogi in every aspect. He inspires millions and will continue to inspire and motivate millions of people in India and abroad through the teachings and his life and the great texts that he has left behind as his legacy.

The ethical teachings of saint *Jnaneshwar* are in consonance with his metaphysics. The world, being a divine manifestation, is not to be scorned. He adopts the theory of *Chidvilas* (play of the pure consciousness) which maintains that the universe is the expression of the Absolute Reality and the cosmos as a sport of the Absolute. It is not something that hides reality but manifest it. The world is neither dreadful nor it is the subject of mere sensual enjoyment. Every object is surcharged with divine significance. Hence he does not teach the doctrine of renunciation. One should not give up one's duties but should perform them in a spirit of worship. Every act should be performed in an attitude of prayer. The ideal man of *Jnaneshwar* is one whose heart overflows with divine Love at the sight of any entity in the world. In one of his *abhanga* he

says, ‘*Je Je Bhete Bhuta TeTe Manije Bhagvan*’³, it means consider any living or non-living being as God.

According to his teachings in *Jnaneshwari* or *Amrutanubhava*, God takes delight in manifesting in and realizing Himself through the infinite variety of forms of existence. Therefore, every form of existence becomes at once endowed with the wealth and beauty of the Infinite. The relation of the ultimate Reality or God with our finite-selves is one of deep empathy and love. God is regarded as the embodiment of love. Hence to know Him is to love Him, and this love is the stimulation of noble deeds and the highest social service. God as Universal Spirit (*Viśvātmaka, Íśvara*) is a very important concept for understanding the real meaning of bhakti. *Viśvātmaka Íśvara* means that understanding of God as abiding in everything and in every human being. So the philosophy of *Jnaneshwar* has not only a significant historical importance but there are also elements in it that have an everlasting universal significance. R.D. Ranade in his book ‘Mysticism in Maharashtra’ categorises Saint *Jnaneshwar* as intellectualistic mystic.

The present world needs a balanced mix of intellectual and spiritual growth. Only through spiritual development the balanced development is possible. There are five dimensions of the concept of balanced development: (1) How does development affect an individual? (2) How does development affect society? (3) How does development affect various life-forms? (4) How does development affect environment? (5) How does development affect the world?

In order to strengthen the balanced concept of development the five dimensions need to be attended to. They are: (1) materialistic, (2) economic, (3) intellectual, (4) moral, (5) spiritual. The main cause of an unbalanced concept is an incomplete system of education. The modern system of education is fully concentrated on enriching in knowledge and earning one’s livelihood. The important aspects of learning- to live together and with others and learning to be one’s true self- are almost neglected. As a

³ Dandekar S.V., *Sārtha Jnaneshwari*, X- 118, 11th edition, 1997, Värkari shikshan Samstha, Älandi (Devachi), Pune.

result of it, knowledge is increasing and economic development is taking place but peaceful co-existence and the identification of the inner wealth is lost.

Being Mystics and bhakti-margins, he had unorthodox, non-fanatic and non-superstitious approach to religion. As put forth by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "As the religion of spirit, mysticism avoids the two extremes of dogmatic affirmation and dogmatic denial."⁴ The devout mystic is so open to all religions that they see brighter side of all religions. A mystic, even after attaining the highest experience is fond of serving society and strives for its spiritual good. This attitude is found in the majority of great mystics.

Jnaneshwari and *Amrutanubhava* is one of the masterpieces in philosophical systems, literature, poetry, metaphysics, science, spirituality, Religion and Yoga. It is also a real guide to live a contented life and let others also live happily. This sapling of the bhakti and spirituality is planted by him and now it has reached its peak by encapsulating everyone into it, '*Iwalese Rope Lawiyele Dari tayacha Meru Gela Gaganavari*'⁵. If his teachings can form a part of the Education System, then it will create better quality of students, with a feeling or a sense of reverence and respect and love for their parents, elderly persons and teachers. Further, it will prevent the disintegration of families and breaking up of homes which have become quite common all over the world. Possibly, blend of science and religion alone can bring peace to the world through the medium of education. This will help to build the men of character required for the holistic society and then there will be a real celebration of peace, humanity, universal brotherhood and welfare of men in the society. Without these values life does not reach its highest crux. Thus, philosophy of *Jnaneshwar* plays an integral and important role in one's life and in nation's development. It reminds me the *Saint* who gave a '*Vishwa Geet*' (universal prayer).

⁴ Radhakrishnan, S., *Eastern Religion and Western Thought*, Oxford India paper Back, 1995, pp. 8-9.

⁵ Rahirkar, G.S., *Sakal Sant Gatha*, p. 523, ab.3625, 3 rd ed., Prembodha Prakashan, 1887.

*“MAY THE SELF OF THE UNIVERSE BE PLEASED WITH THIS OFFERING OF WORDS AND BESTOW HIS GRACE ON ME.
MAY THE DARKNESS OF IGNORANCE DISAPPEAR!
MAY THE UNIVERSE SEE THE SUN OF SELF CONSCIOUSNESS,
MAY WHATSOEVER ASPIRATIONS OF THOSE BE FULFILLED!
OF ALL LIVING BEINGS!”*⁶

This universal prayer resounded across all the countries. There is aspiration for the truth in all, and desire for eternal happiness, peace and harmony should dwell everywhere. By realizing the ‘Oneness’ (union), his spiritual echoes the religion of ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’ (the whole world is one family) and ‘*Sarva dharma samabhava*’ (respect for all). They are the ones who bring permanent spiritual realm in the domain of temporal world. In this attempt they quietly suffer all hurdles and hardships. He not only preached the virtue of service, sacrifice, generosity, equality and fraternity there by service of humanity but practiced it. The teachings of Saint *Jnaneshwar* echoes the preamble of UNESCO which states that “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be constructed.” It is a culture of peace, a set of values, attitudes, traditions, modes of behavior and ways of life that reflect and inspires each one who is either member or even not the member of this tradition will really help to open up the dialogue between two or more different faiths of religion, culture, race, and gender and so on. Let’s come together to established the world on the principles and values of love and compassion by accepting and respecting the otherness of others. The philosophy of *Jnaneshwar* which is based on the *abhanga* “*Avaghachi Samsara Sukhacha Karin Anandhe Bharin Tinhi Loke*”⁷

⁶ Swami Kripananda, *Jnaneshwara’s Gita* as rendered by Swami Kripananda.

⁷ <https://www.santsahitya.in/dnyaneshwar/sant-dnyaneshwer-abhnag-54/>

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