

SAINT NAMDEO (1270 – 1850)

A brief introduction

By Prof. V.G. Nand

Born at sunrise in 1270 Namdeo was blessed with a long life of eighty years. His ancestors hailed from Narsi, district Parbhani in Marathwada. Later, his parents settled in Pandharpur. The family were devout worshippers of Vithoba which led to Namdeo's becoming a devotee of Vithoba since his early childhood. His father was a tailor by profession but Namdeo though belonging to a tailor's caste and family became a devotee of Vitthal from very early age. He was married to Rajae at the age of eight and his father thought that post-marriage he will get involved in family life, take up the family profession and will bring grist to the mill. But not Namdeo. All he was interested in was his devoted loving worship of Vitthal. His wife was dejected. She came from a rich family but here she had to manage within limited means as her husband had no other interest in life except vitthal Bhakti. Realising his wife's discomfort he convinced her about the glory of Vitthal Bhakti which subsequently brought about a change in her outlook. Thereafter, he spent the remainder of his life smoothly in Vitthal Bhakti.

Namdeo was a devoted worshipper of Vitthal; he considered himself his child and had great fondness for Vitthal's worship and Pandharpur. He spent the major part of his life at Pandharpur in the worship of his dear Vitthal.

He was a contemporary of Saint Dnyaneshwar and they had great admiration for each other. On St. Dnyaneshwar's insistence he travelled with him to several places in Gujarat like Prabhas Patan, Dwarka, Dakor and so on and then returned to Pandharpur, needless to say to his great delight for it was painful for Namdeo to part with Pandharpur. When his great friend took leave of this world, took Samadhi (willfully abandoning life in deep meditation under earth), Namdeo felt very very sad. He wept and wept.

After that he decided to go on a long journey to the Northern parts of India. He travelled from Pandharpur to Gujarat, Saurashtra; from there on to Rajasthan and finally to Punjab where he spent some eighteen years moving through various parts of Punjab. He found a quiet place for himself there which is known as Ghuman which came to be settled as a village when Namdeo chose to live there. There is a spacious temple in Ghuman. The Sikhs of Punjab have named it 'Gurudwara Baba Namdeo'. He made several compositions in Hindi while in Punjab. People of Punjab have very high regard for him and Namdeo is the only Marathi Saint whose compositions appear among the sixteen Saint-poets in 'GuruGranth Sahib'. Wherever he went he propagated BHAGWAT DHARMA. Namdeo had reached the culmination in terms of his achievement now. He then returned to Pandharpur. Probably he felt he had done. He went into Samadhi in 1850 at the first of the steps leading to Vitthal temple in Pandharpur. Namdeo is regarded as the first biographer and autobiographer in Marathi Literature. There are many aspects of his literary creation. He was a saint. His writing goes along the Bhakti Marg. He was a great keertankar and in his keertan he sang the praises of Lord Vitthal and at the same time exposed the pretenders, the so-called, self-proclaimed teachers of religion telling people how they befooled them. Apart from the Abhangas he wrote, he popularised the warkari sect and along with Dnyaneshwar he was the foremost propagator of Warkari Sect. He still holds sway on public mind though seven centuries have elapsed. That is his great contribution.

Today millions of people throng at Pandharpur walking several kms. from their homes to this place.

He sings mainly the love and greatness of Vitthal but side by side his writing also reveals the social critic and reformist in him. He is very forthright in expressing his opinions. The major bulk of his writing of course is devoted to love for Lord Vitthal, singing glory of Lord Vitthal. Simple, Lucid, unambiguous, rhythmical, compact and delightful are the salient features of his Abhangas.

Note:

Abhang along with Owee is the earliest form of poetry in Marathi Literature. Metrical and short pithy expressions, bringing out maximum meaning in minimum words characterize Abhang and Owee that is why they have been so easy to memorize.

Here are twelve Abhangas of Namdeo translated into English. In these Abhangas Saint Namdeo sings of the love and greatness of God and in one of them, the last one (No.12) he lashes out at the fake preachers who try to befool people by pretending to be great holy men who are empowered to talk on religion and God. The translation has been done keeping in mind the philosophical content of the Abhangas.

Abhanga No. 1

Many will initiate you with Mantra Yantra ¹	None will but show you Ram 1 actually
If someone actually shows me Ram I will touch his feet ²	What need have I of others then ? 2
Whoever shows me Ram in fulfilling all my desires, all my hopes	I will offer my life, my soul to him 3
A great achievement would it be for me	If I meet such a close-bosom-buddy. 4

¹ Incantation and a mechanical device usually a copper plate on which certain figure and code is engraved. These are parts of the ways to worship God as also an effort to attain some wish.

² Hindu way of showing respect to elders. An act of obeisance.

Abhanga No. 2

Just as the tree is indifferent to honour or
insult | So are the Saints unaffected by ||1||
scorn or admiration

People come and worship | The tree shows no elation for it ||2||

Some turn up to cut branches of it | The tree does not resist ||3||

The Saints who treat praise and blame
alike | Are true courageous Saints who like ||4||
an ocean remain unmoved³

Nama says, if you meet such Saints | You feel you have met God ||5||
Himself.

³ The ocean has many currents under the surface but it patiently absorbs them; the Saints, too have tides of passion and sentiments clashing against the walls of their mind but they absorb such currents coolly and show no signs of being affected anyway by them in their bearing.

Abhanga No. 3

Sweeter than nectar thy name O God	O Keshava ⁴ , why can't I take it? 1
Tell me O Lord Pandhariraya ⁵ what should I do ?	Why can't I concentrate and call up your image? 2
When I go for keertan ⁶ sleep overpowers me	My mind is drawn towards sensual pleasures 3
Haridas (keertankar) sings the glory of the Lord's name	Says Nama, but I find no interest in it. 4

⁴ & ⁵ Names by which God is addressed. Hindus have countless such names by which they address God.

⁶ Chiefly a form of mass-communication for celebrating the praise of God with music and singing. Also used as a means of social reformation through illustrations and counselling. Keertan promotes general knowledge and prescribes norms of good behaviour.

Abhanga No. 4

Come Vitthal ⁷ , O Lord of the destitutes	My family deity of Pandharpur	1
Will light the lamp of my five-aired spirit ⁸	And do thy Aarati ⁹	2
My mind now a cleansed canvas	Fill in the colours of your choice	3
My soul will be the seat of pleasure	For you O Vithoba ¹⁰	4
Be my protector O Lord, leave me not as an orphan	Possess my soul wilfully	5
Fulfill my desire, my aim	Bless me with thy love eternally.	6

⁷ A name of God.

⁸ The five vital airs constituting animal life.

⁹ Among Hindus the practice of moving a burning lamp around an idol as a part of worship.

¹⁰ Name of Lord Vishnu, a name of God. Vishnu, Keshiraja etc. are synonyms of Vithoba.

Abhanga No. 5

Thou art my mother, I am thy child	Feed me O Panduranga the milk of thy love 1
Thou art my mother ¹¹ , I am thy calf	Don't hold back the flow of the milk of thy love O Panduranga 2
Thou art my doe, I am thy fawn	Unfasten my world ties O Panduranga 3
Thou art my bird-mom, I am thy offspring	Provide me fodder O Lord Panduranga 4
Says Nama : You love your devotees and your worship they do	Take all-round care of me O Panduranga. 5

¹¹ Intended to be mother-cow.

Abhanga No. 6

Vitthal is Holy-water, Vitthal is Holy- place	Vitthal is God, Vitthal is the 1 worship
Vitthal is my mother, Vitthal is my father	Vitthal is my brother, my clan 2
Vitthal is my guru, Vitthal is Gods' guru	Vitthal is an inseparable treasure 3
Says Nama, since I have Vitthal with me	I am not bothered about any 4 adversity.

Abhanga No. 7

O Vitthal my actions, my practices, my duty are all contained in you	I am only a servant, your gate- keeper	1
---	---	---

O Lord of the lowly take care of me as you like	Never shall I forsake thy name	2
--	--------------------------------	---

I will sing you with love in my heart	This alone is my vow forever	3
---------------------------------------	------------------------------	---

O Keshiraja ¹² , the ocean of bliss, says Nama	Thou art my favourer from the beginning to the end.	4
--	--	---

¹² A name of Vitthal.

Abhanga No. 8

Virtually formless, distinct or indistinct	Has assumed form here	1
Like a piece of ice seen in water	The formless Lord has appeared in a form here	2
Just as Gold and Wealth or, Wealth and Gold are the same	So is the Lord with or without any attributes	3
Thus in totality and very easily	Dear Keshiraja ¹³ has come to form here	4
The whole world has become one with Panduranga ¹⁴	I experience Him thus and He pacifies all my senses, says Nama	5

¹³ & ¹⁴ Names of Lord Vitthal.

Abhanga No. 9

Longing for Vitthal, love for Vitthal, cry
for Vitthal

Will clear the doubts of prospective ||1||
rebirth

Say Narhari¹⁵, utter Krishna¹⁶, Hari¹⁷,
Shreedhar¹⁸

This name is the vehicle for us to ||2||
cross over the cycle of rebirth

Lord Hari is the only true-element uttering
His name gives us the rare auspicious
moment to meet Him

Thus has been stated in the Vedas, ||3||
Shastras and Puranaas.

I desire nothing except uttering the names
Vitthal, Krishna incessantly

Nama says look I have swum ||4||
through the sea of life uttering
Vitthal, Vitthal only.

^{15, 16, 17 & 18}: All names of God, particularly Vitthal.

Abhanga No. 10

Vitthal is our resort of happiness	Remembrance of Vitthal is the spring of love	1
We meditate on Vitthal and sing Vitthal alone	I see Vitthal in every being	2
We will see nothing but Vitthal	Even if we take birth after birth	3
With Vitthal within there is total bliss	All resolves, all doubts are put to rest, says Nama	4

Abhanga No. 11

He is in the Vedas (Scriptures), in Shastras
(Exegesis) nay-every-where

He is in Puranaas as well as in one's ||1||
heart

Ponder on His name, think of His name
ever

Keep calling up His name ||2||
incessantly

Nama says this human birth is not easily
obtainable again and again

So better simply take the name of ||3||
Lord Keshava that is easy to utter.

Note:

Vedas: There are four Vedas namely, Regved, Yajurved, Atharvaved, and Samved.

Puranaas: There are eighteen Puranaas namely, Brahma, Padma, Brahmanda, Agni, Vishnu, Garud, Brahma-vaivarta, Shiva, Linga, Narada, Skanda, Markandeya, Bhavishya, Matsya, Varaha, Koorma, Waman and Bhagwat puran.

Exegesis: There are six : Shiksha, Kalpa (Ritual), Vyakaran (Grammar), Chhanda (Prosody), Jyotish (Astronomy) & Nirukta (Etymology)

Abhanga No. 12

Wearing the ascetics' apparel they pretend
to be great ascetics

While they have no genuine urge for ||1||
God

They make mind-boggling show of being
greatly detached

But are from within inclined ||2||
towards carnal pleasures

Hypocritically they profess the path of
self-denial

Thereby condemn and create guilt ||3||
about life in the commoners' mind

How can they take anyone to God?

By adopting such hypocritical ways, ||4||
tell me O Panduranga?

Bio:

Prof. V.G. Nand, M.A. (Eng.) P.G.D.T.E. (CIE) Hyderabad

☎ 08652857704

Prof. V.G. Nand is a retired Principal and Professor of English having taught English language and literature at graduate and post-graduate levels. He has taught Communication skills and public speaking to college students as also to professionals doing C.A. course. He had conducted Public Speaking and Effective Communication Course for Fifteen Summers for the Rotaract [Main] Club of Dombivli in recognition of which he was awarded Late Appa Datar Trophy for Best Social Worker of the town in 2001. He is a poet and translator with two publications to his credit namely TRIVIDHA in 2007 – a collection of poems in three languages, Marathi, Hindi, English and DHOOP KA SAAYA in 2012 – a collection of poems in Hindi. He has done a dozen of translations, seven of which have been published. 'Relationships' by N.F. Jain (English into English); some poems of Late Prof. and poet

Keshav Meshram's poems from Marathi into English appearing in Indian Literature Vol. XXIII No. 1 and 2 in 1980; two of his poems appeared in, 'Poisoned Bread' and 'No Entry for the New Sun' published by Orient Longmans in 1992 and Disha Publications in 1992 respectively, both edited by Arjun Dangle; 'Toba Teksinh' – Saadat Hassan Munto's story from Hindi into Marathi for Tarun Bharat in 2005; SONBA a short novel by Ramakant Jadhav, from Marathi into English published by Aai Publications Dombivli, in 2000 and by Hope India Delhi, in 2006; 'SONJATAK' by Ratanlal Sanagra from Marathi into English published by Signet Publications in 2002 and Padma Binani's A To Z Mahabharat from Hindi into English published by Binani Foundations in 2012.