CHAPTER III

LIFE AND WORKS OF JÑÄNEŚVARA
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Life

Jñāneśvara was a great saint and mystical poet of Mahārāṣṭra. He lived in 13th century. He was born in Alandi in Puna, in 1271 A.D. when he was only twenty two years old he took Sañjīvant Samādhi. He attained self-realization in his young. He wrote such excellent works as Jñāneśvari, Amritānubhava, Changdeva-Paśasti and Abhaṅgās. His commentary on Bhagavadgītā commonly known as ‘Bhāvārthadīpika’. In this work, Jñāneśvara has explained an abstruse subject like the Vedānta in lucid words by the use of appropriate similes, metaphors and illustrations.

Jñāneśvara was the son of Vitālpanth and Rukmābāi. After marriage Vitālpanth remained at Alandi for some time. But due to his lack of interest in family life he decided to take renunciation. He travel to Kāśi and met a great saint Rāmānandavāmi and became his disciple. Vitālpanth was renamed as ‘Chaitanyaśrama’. After a few months, Rāmānandavāmi ordered Chaitanyaśrama immediately to return to his wife and establish a family.
Though Vitālpanth returned and started a new marital life, his Brahmin society rejected him. *Nivrithinatha, Jñāneśvara, Sopānadeva* as sons and *Mukthābāi* as daughter were born to the couples who thrived against the rejection. The *Brahmin* priests did not allow him even for the *upanayana* of his children. Vitālpanth approached the *Brāhmins* begging and offered any expiation for the sake of his children so that they will be spared. A *Brāhmin* leader after going through the text books suggested sacrificing his own life. Believing that his self sacrifice will provide well being for his children, he went to *prayāga* and sacrificed his life in *sangamaṇi*. Some say Rukmābāi followed her husband and others not, but Rukmābāi is not seen in the rest of the story of *Jñāneśvara*.

*Nivrittinādhā* discipled to *Gaininādha* and according to the order of the teacher gave advice to his younger brother *Jñāneśvara*. Subsequently *Jñāneśvara* passed on the advice to his younger brother *Sopānadeva* and sister Muktābāi and got satisfied. Jñāneśvara attained complete knowledge in Sānskrit and Marāthi during his 8th year of age. After completing *Aṣṭāṅgayoga*, he achieved divine power and became a *Brahmin*.

The book on Interpretation of *Gītā*, the *Jñāneśvari* was written by Jñāneśvara on his 16th year of age. This contains 9037 Ovis. But
how the exemplary knowledge exhibited by the author in Jñāneśvarī and deep knowledge in literature has been acquired by him in this young age remains unexplained in any traditional histories. Jñāneśvara spent his later life worshipping Vitala in Paṇḍārpur. Paṇḍārpur was a refugee centre for devotees irrespective of their caste. Nāmadeva, Kumbhara, Pañcamavaṇṇa, Samvata, Narahari, Janabāi etc all were the devotees of Jñāneśvara. He tried to redirect their devotion to eternal knowledge. Along with his dearest devotee Nāmadeva, Jñāneśvara started a pilgrim tour to North India. After returning, he asked permission from his teacher to attain spiritual extinction assuming that he completed his lively duties (That was during 1296 AD as his age was just 21 years). It was decided that the better time for spiritual extinction was Trayodasi day of kārtika month, kriṣṇapakṣa of Malayālam era 1218. Indrani Lake in Alindi was the destiny for the eternal extinction.

The wonders exhibited by Jñāneśvara himself are inevitable features in his traditional history. One among them is forceful recitation of Veda by a buffalo in front of the Brahmīn community of the place. To ‘defeat’ the priest Changdev who traveled on a tiger, Jñāneśvara traveled sitting on a wall as if on a vehicle with his siblings is another story. When he met Saccidānandabābā for the first time, he was lying dead and from his eternal power, Jñāneśvara gave soul and life to him,
is yet another story. The beautiful creation, ‘Jñāneśvari’ itself which was written in such a young age isn’t enough really to surprise us?

**Jñāneśvara’s Commentary on Bhagavadgītā**

‘Sant Jñāneśvara’ of Mahārāṣṭra (1275-1296) was a great philosopher as well as a great poet. His original name was ‘Jñāneśvara Vittal Kulkarni’. Jñāneśvara says in the tenth chapter ovi.19, that his Guru and his elder brother Nivrūttinadh instructed him to explain the knowledge of Brahman in the form of the Bhagavadgītā. Jñāneśvara further adds that he wrote Bhagavadgītā’s commentary in order to destroy the poverty of thought and reveal the knowledge of Brahman. This commentary, originally named ‘Bhāvārthadīpikā’ came to be known as ‘Jñāneśvari’ after its author and became famous for obvious reasons. It is a commentary on the seven hundred verses of the Bhagavadgītā expanded in about nine thousand and thirty seven ovis, suitable for melodious singing. This is not a regular commentary on the Gītā; it is an independent work taking Gītā as a reference and unravelling the concepts of all the Indian philosophical systems. It was composed in Marathi language, one of the earliest commentaries in a vernacular. This classical work is selected by the famous world-organization ‘UNESCO’ for translation into English, French and Spanish languages for its international propagation₁. Producing a
unique combination of poetry, philosophy and mysticism, Jñāneśvara contributed immensely to the popularization of the Gītā. Jñāneśvari is the sweetest exposition of the Bhagavadgītā and it marks the dawn of Marathi literature. In the words of B.P Bahirat, ‘The Jñāneśvari is the first and the greatest work in the Marāthi language both from the point of a high literary excellence and of an elevating philosophy of life’. The Jñāneśvari was not written but delivered extempore, chapter after chapter by Jñāneśvara. Jñāneśvari is the Magnum opus of Jñāneśvara’s brilliant career and it is a wonderful miracle.

As the other works of Jñāneśvara, it is almost certain that the Jñāneśvari was first preached as spiritual instructions. Later, the Jñāneśvari was compiled in its verse form based on the eighteen chapters of the Bhagavadgītā. Jñāneśvari is now available in a form which is both acceptable to the learned and easily understood by the unsophisticated. Since, like Gītā, Jñāneśvari is being recited and read in numerous households in Mahārāstra, educated as well as uneducated. Thousands study its philosophical contents in original as well as in translation. Jñāneśvari has been praised not only for its aesthetic value but also for its scholarly excellence. It brings to common man, spiritual philosophies and Vedānta. The various paths a person can take for spiritual progress and ultimate liberation are explained in it.
Bhakti or loving devotion is the fruit of right knowledge and the spring of right actions. This is the message of Gītā and Jñāneśvara proclaims it in words that are so sublime, so lucid and so enchanting. The object of the Jñāneśvari is to spread spiritual bliss, to eliminate dearth of discrimination and to enable any aspirant to have the glimpse of Divine Knowledge.\(^3\)

The Jñāneśvari has also been the source of inspiration to people interested in different categories. It brought maturity, pride and prestige to the Marathi language. In traditional method, Bhagavadgītā is divided into three compartments, each consisting of six chapters. Instead of adopting this method, Jñāneśvara gives his original views about the divisions. The first three chapters form the first division in which the way of action is described. The pathway of Bhakti or devotion which is described in the next eight chapters i.e. from 4 to 11 forms the second division. The path of knowledge is described in the third division, which consists of chapters 12 to 15.\(^4\) Jñāneśvara thinks that the Bhagavadgītā proper ends here. The qualities which help the growth of knowledge are discussed in the 16th chapter. Last two chapters are devoted to answer some incidental questions of Arjuna. The last chapter sums up the whole Gītā besides these answers. Jñāneśvara calls this chapter as ‘Kalāśādhyāyā’i.e the pinnacle of the temple of the Gītā.
Jñāneśvara adopts the theory of Chidvilas which maintains that the universe is the expression of the Absolute Reality. Jñāneśvara’s philosophy is the source of his exquisite poetry contained in the Jñāneśvari. The whole work is predominated by Śāntarasa. According to Jñāneśvara this Śāntarasa does not mean merely a negative otherworldly sentiment, but it is a positive feeling of deep devotion. Jñāneśvara says that he is united with God and yet serves Him as a true devotee. There is the union of Bhakta with his God and yet separation from Him. It is the Bhaktiyoga’s secret revealed in the Jñāneśvari. In Jñāneśvari, Jñāneśvara has explained an abstruse subject like Vedānta in lucid words by the use of appropriate metaphors, illustrations and similes. But many changes have taken place in the style of Marathi language and vocabulary. The result of this work has become unintelligible to even the Marathi speaking people.

The content of Jñāneśvari reflects a detailed knowledge of Metaphysics, astrology and Kūṇḍalinī. Jñāneśvari lays importance on God as energy. It emphasis that there are many different living forms, they all breath oxygen. All of them have the same life force within them, which is a part of God, who is intelligence and energy. It states that people can use intelligence and energy to connect with the Supreme and to achieve the same, it provides methodologies. Jñāneśvara says that everyone should perform his duty as a yajña and offer his or her
action as flowers at the feet of God. He also says that true knowledge consists in knowing God in the non-dual form and that devotion should culminate in Advaitabhakti. The devotee should realise God as all-pervasive; and wherever he casts his eyes, he should see God therein. This shows that Jñāneśvara has become a Jnani-bhakta of the highest order as described in the Gītā⁶.

Works of Jñāneśvara

The works of Jñāneśvara so far available are-

1. Jñāneśvari or Bhāvārthadīpika
2. Amṛtānubhava
3. Changadeva-Pasasti
4. Haripatha
5. Namana
6. Miscellaneous Abhaṅgās

Amṛtānubhava

Amṛtānubhava is the greatest philosophical work in Marathi literature and is also known as ‘Anubhavāmṛt’. It is a compilation of eight hundred ovi or verses. Amṛtānubhava is not based on the Vedāntasūtrās of Upaniṣads. From the maturity of the thought
expressed in the *Amṛtānubhava* it could be said that it is written after the *Jñāneśvari*. Jñāneśvara expounds his theory of *Sphūrtivāda* with a fine logical acumen as well as with a mastery and wealth of poetic imagery. The *Amṛtānubhava* ends in revealing the secret of *Akritrimabhakti* or natural devotion and forms the philosophical basis of the religion of *Bhakti* in Maharashtra.

**Changadeva-Pasasti**

*Changadeva-Pasasti* is a shorter work which contains only sixty five verses. When *Changadeva-Pasasti* met Jñāneśvara, he gave up all his pride and became his humble disciple. When he attempted to write to Jñāneśvara, words would not flow. So he sent a blank letter to Jñāneśvara. Jñāneśvara replied to him in Pasashta(Sixty five) verses, commenting on the *Upaniṣadic mahāvākya*, one of the key phrases, ‘*tattavamasi*’, i.e that thou art. In this work Jñāneśvara brilliantly shows that the nature of reality is *Advaitic*.

**Haripatha**

The word meaning of ‘*Haripatha*’ is remembering the name of the Lord Hari with intense affection. Haripatha consists of twenty eight *Abhaṅgās*. The chanting of the name of God is the royal way to meet him. There is neither time nor season for the chanting of God’s name. The name of God is like a door of His temple. If anyone stands for a
moment at this door he goes beyond the four salvations. Jñāneśvara encourages the recitation of Holy name and that is why Haripatha is very popular among the Varkaris who make daily use of the work. The Haripatha is the outcome of the natural devotion described in the Amrutānubhava.

**Namana**

Namana contains one hundred and eight stanzas in the ovi metre and is the hymn in praise of the Lord of the universe. Describing the importance of the prayer, Jñāneśvara says, ‘Prayers is the supreme end. It is the precious secret. It is the Divine experience. Prayer is the faith in God, nay, it is God himself’.  

**Miscellaneous Abhaṅgās**

About nine hundred Miscellaneous Abhaṅgās of Jñāneśvara are available. Miscellaneous Abhaṅgās are religious lyrics and are written on different subjects such as the sweetness of the name of the Lord, the greatness of the spiritual teacher, description of the lovely form of God Vithal, the futility of asceticism and the supremacy of the path of devotion and the advice of the aspirants. ‘Virahini’ is a type of Miscellaneous Abhaṅgās. The Lord of the universe is depicted as the lover and his devotee as his beloved in these Miscellaneous Abhaṅgās. The sweet and the highest experience of a devotee is expressed in the
Virahini Miscellaneous Abhaṅgās. It is the culmination of the Haripatha or uttering the name of the Lord with intense love.

Other works

Without any serious disputes, the above mentioned works have been acknowledged as those of Jñāneśvara. Uttaragītā, Bhaktirāj, Yogavāsiṣṭha, Sukasatak, Jñānaprakās, Pañcīkaran, Gāyatrītīka etc. are some of other works vaguely suggested to be those of Jñāneśvara, but no serious historical research is in evidence to prove this.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. LJ - P. 2 - 5, Preface
2. Ibid - P. 16
3. Ibid - P. 18
4. PL - P. 39
5. Ibid - P. 33
6. BD - Forward VII
7. NS - P. 59
8. LJ - P. 81
9. TPJ - P. 99
10. LJ - P. 22 - 23
11. Ibid - P. 28